Cities of Sub-Saharan Africa

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Cities of Sub-Saharan Africa

Abstract
SSA's interlocking urban environmental problems are magnified by shortcomings in management and oversight by both governments and the private sector. Patrick lives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where he works as a chef at a Chinese restaurant. Patrick is a mixed-race South African, born in Cape Town. He worked for many years as a cook on oil tankers, where many of the crew members were Bangladeshi, Filipino, or Tanzanian, the latter often from the Zanzibar islands or from Dar es Salaam.

Disciplines
African History | African Languages and Societies | Cultural History | Demography, Population, and Ecology | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Urban, Community and Regional Planning

Comments
Cities of Sub-Saharan Africa
GARTH MYERS, FRANCIS OWUSU, AND ANGELA GRAY SUBULWA

KEY URBAN FACTS

Total Population 963 million
Percent Urban Population 37%
Total Urban Population 359 million
Most Urbanized Countries Gabon (87%)
Djibouti (77%)
South Africa (64%)
Least Urbanized Countries Burundi (12%)
Uganda (16%)
Malawi (16%)
Number of Megacities 2 cities
Number of Cities of More Than 1 Million 43 cities
Three Largest Cities Lagos (13 m), Kinshasa (11 m), Luanda (5 m)
Number of World Cities (Highest Ranking) 2 (Johannesburg, Cape Town)
Emerging World Cities Nairobi, Lagos, Durban

KEY CHAPTER THEMES

1. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is among the least urbanized of the world's regions, but it has some of the world's most rapidly urbanizing countries.
2. A rich urban tradition preceded the arrival of colonialism in several parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.
3. Colonialism had profound impacts on urban development, particularly in the creation of what would become primate cities along the coast.
4. Rates of urban primacy are generally high across the region, with a few exceptions, and economic production and political power are concentrated in the primate cities.
5. Many, though not all, primate cities are also capital cities.
6. Many SSA cities have experienced major impacts from cultural globalization, as in changing patterns of consumption and personal security, but minimum impacts from economic globalization, in terms of production and investment.

7. Most SSA urban land-use patterns and urban economies develop outside of formal regulation, but with significant overlap of the “formal” and the “informal” urban structures and economies, both of which are highly gendered spaces.

8. Many Sub-Saharan African cities are characterized by spatial, socioeconomic, and gender inequalities and high rates of urban poverty.

9. Water is a major concern in Sub-Saharan cities, as urban growth and climate change impact water availability and quality.

10. Great cultural diversity and creativity help shape very dynamic urban life experiences for residents of the region’s cities.

SSA’s interlocking urban environmental problems are magnified by shortcomings in management and oversight by both governments and the private sector. Patrick lives in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where he works as a chef at a Chinese restaurant. Patrick is a mixed-race South African, born in Cape Town. He worked for many years as a cook on oil tankers, where many of the crew members were Bangladeshi, Filipino, or Tanzanian, the latter often from the Zanzibar islands or from Dar es Salaam. After a stint cooking for an offshore oil rig in Cabinda, Angola, he took up an offer from a Tanzanian friend to come start a new high-end restaurant in the rapidly gentrifying inner city Kariokoo neighborhood in Dar es Salaam. Patrick has found it exciting to learn KiSwahili, which will be his sixth language once he conquers it, but he posts messages on Facebook and tweets for his South African friends around the world in Afrikaans or English. He loves the mix of foods and cuisines available in Dar es Salaam, but favors Chinese food, which gained a foothold in Tanzania and much of Africa along with Chinese investments in the region’s cities in the early twenty-first century. He hopes that the restaurant will take off, with an eclectic mix of Tanzanian African, Asian, and European customers.

Meanwhile, across the world in Houston, Jamila, a Nigerian-born software engineer, receives a text message from her father in Calabar asking her to call home. She knows what this means, but hesitates because she wants to have good news for him before she calls. She sends an email to the secretary of the local hometown association for southeastern Nigerians in Texas, and asks for an update on her plea for help in raising funds—because her father will be telling her, she knows, to come home for her mother’s funeral. Jamila has the money for her own plane ticket, but she knows the family will expect her to pay all of the funeral costs and to bring her twin daughters with her. She is conflicted, since she knows that the whole extended family feels that they have invested in her education and emigration with the expectation that she will provide support through remunerations. She has succeeded for many years in sending enough money home to build her parents the nicest house in their neighborhood in Calabar; but her husband’s recent death has put a major strain on her household financially, to say nothing of her sadness. The hometown association secretary tells her the news she has been waiting for: in just two days, the large southeastern Nigerian community in Texas has
raised more than $10,000 on her behalf. She does not know how she will ever thank these people, many of whom she does not know and only a handful of whom would ever have met her mother. She would do the same for them, she tells herself because “all of us in what we call The Remote Lands have to stick together to help our Motherland.” She calls her father in Calabar, Skype-to-Skype since it is free, with the good news, and on her laptop video camera box, through the Skype software, she sees tears on her father’s face, for the first time in her life.

AFRICAN URBANIZATION

SSA has long been among the least urbanized world regions. But many Sub-Saharan countries have been urbanizing rapidly since the 1960s (Figure 8.1). This rapid urban growth has come with limited opportunities for employment in the formal economy or for effective governance. African cities also suffer from a lack of decent and affordable housing, failing infrastructure and basic urban services, alongside increasing inequalities (Figure 8.2). But negative views of contemporary cities are overly simplistic and pervasive. African cities are also creative engines of cultural change and dynamic centers of political and associational life (Figure 8.3). Many accounts of cities in SSA miss the resourcefulness, inventiveness, and determination of millions of ordinary people who manage to negotiate the perils of everyday life, to make something out of nothing (Box 8.1).

Cities in Sub-Saharan Africa are diverse and heterogeneous. Scholarly efforts to construct an ideal model of a generic “African

Figure 8.2  Chronic flooding necessitates near-constant, major efforts to drain residential areas of Pikine, an informal city on the outskirts of Dakar, Senegal. Many of SSA’s informal settlements are flood-prone, yet their residents often experience the deprivation of limited access to clean drinking water. Source: Photo by Garth Myers.
city” in terms of urban structure have failed to find a single profile that fits all cases. Anthony O’Connor, for example, tried to fashion such a general scheme more than 25 years ago, but his effort led him toward not one but six possible types. O’Connor identified and diagrammed city morphologies that he classified as the indigenous city, the Islamic city, the European city, the colonial city, and the dual city with examples across the continent. His sixth category—what he termed the hybrid city—actually functions as a kind of catch-all for cities with multiple morphological characteristics. Over time, more cities in Africa seem to have become hybrid cities.

The paths to such African hybrid cities are complex and sometimes contradictory. While many cities came into existence as overseas extensions of European colonial powers seeking to establish beachheads on the African continent, their subsequent growth and development did not conform to one pattern. City-building processes that took place under the dominance of European colonialism often left an indelible imprint on the original spatial layout, built environment, and architectural styles of cities in Africa. Yet with time, these features have sometimes been modified beyond recognition. Thus cities that were built specifically for Europeans, such as Cape Town or Nairobi, still have clear European influences, but these have been overwhelmed by African urbanism. The colonial urbanisms, too, have been dramatically transformed by what amounts to 50 years of independence for most cities. Likewise, indigenous, Islamic, and dual cities have in nearly all cases witnessed the steady overlay and erasure of their original forms through colonial and postcolonial impacts (Figure 8.4).

In SSA cities, previous patterns of government dominance in urban centers have been replaced by more reliance on the private sector and/or nongovernmental institutions.
Box 8.1 Water, Water, Everywhere

Water is one of the most complicated aspects of urban Africa. Half of all large SSA cities are within 50 miles of the coast, and many of them are on river mouths, estuaries, or deltas. Many others (including some of the region’s largest urban areas, such as Kinshasa, Khartoum, and Brazzaville) are located in low-lying riverine settings. This means that a great many cities in SSA face significant flood risks, which are often most severe in poor settlements. Even in cities at relatively high average elevations, poorer areas and informal settlements are typically at lower elevations in zones subject to seasonal flooding. Khartoum, Dar es Salaam, Dakar, and many other major urban areas have experienced severe flooding in the last few years alone. Moreover, the Climate Change Vulnerability Index points toward high or severe risk from rising sea levels along Africa’s urban coastline. Urban flooding has also increased water-borne disease threats, including the spread of malaria into East African highland cities, such as Addis Ababa and Kigali, that were previously malaria-free.

In a bitter irony, many SSA cities face potential water shortages caused by climate change and rapid growth. The most severe threats of freshwater shortages, unsurprisingly, appear to be in cities in arid and semi-arid areas such as the Sahel. But, even cities with plentiful precipitation have failed to keep pace with the rise of consumer water demand under conditions of rapid urbanization. Most everywhere, potable water supply shortages are severe and increasing.

Water may present certain risks in SSA cities, but it also presents abundant opportunities. After all, so many cities in Africa are on coasts or navigable rivers because of trade opportunities that continue to increase. African cities are among the world’s leaders in urban agriculture. Parks, preserves, forested areas, and natural open spaces are also widespread in SSA cities, despite stereotypes of African cities as “cities of slums.” Centers of higher learning across the continent tend to be urban, and the curricula in many countries feature environmental education lessons from primary levels onward that are improving popular knowledge of healthy and efficient water usage. Environmental awareness and activism are on the rise across the continent, especially in urban areas, and water issues are often central to this activism. In the peri-urban slum of Pikine outside Dakar, hip-hop artists, other musicians, graffiti artists, and Senegalese professional wrestlers have played major roles in raising awareness of flood relief and prevention. Water provisioning can also be an important entrepreneurial arena, particularly in informal settlements (see Figure 8.2). A Nigerian-American geography research team has highlighted the policy implications of the ignorance of officials about the struggles of poor Niamey residents to obtain water, and the crucial role of entrepreneurial water vendors in providing this most basic need. Water and sanitation activists in Nairobi also built a highly successful business, Ikotoilet, from environmentally efficient toilets. Innovation and creativity abound in water and sanitation services, proving that one must be cautious about seeing water only as a source of problems in urban Africa.

Municipal authorities have not kept up with the demand for infrastructure, social services, or access to resources. Many urban residents have looked outside the formal economy and conventional administrative channels to gain access to income, shelter, land, or social services (Box 8.2).

The wide range of seemingly unsolvable problems has led some to conclude that cities in Africa just "don't work." Others, like the urban scholar AbdouMaliq Simone, prefer to see them as "works in progress," driven forward by inventive ordinary people. In city after city, urban residents rely on their own ingenuity to stitch together their daily lives. SSA cities are often distressed places in need of good governance, management, or infrastructure, greater popular participation in decision making, sustainable livelihoods, and expanded socioeconomic opportunities. Yet they are much more than some form of failed urbanism. To see SSA cities more complexly, we must appreciate the historical specificity and heterogeneous cultural vibrancy of different cities in Africa.

**HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT**

Simply because SSA is often considered among the least urbanized world regions, outsiders assume that its cities must be recent. Because European colonialism was such a pervasive regional experience, it is also assumed that the urbanization of Africa ought to be attributed to colonialism. In fact, many SSA urban settlements are much older than the colonial era, and the relationships between formal colonialism and the urbanization process in Africa
Box 8.2 Multiple Livelihoods Strategies

The economic crisis that spread across Africa in the 1970s and 1980s and the structural adjustment programs that were introduced have caused major upheavals in the livelihood strategies of millions of people in African cities, including formal-sector employees.

Since the early 1990s, an increasing number of studies have documented how people of various socioeconomic backgrounds seek additional income by engaging in multiple economic activities. Many formal-sector employees supplement their incomes with part-time informal-sector jobs, such as cab driving or petty trading. Other members of their households may also supplement the family income by engaging in similar activities. For instance, many civil servants in Kampala engage in urban agriculture and poultry keeping, own taxis or operate small kiosks, and about two-thirds of households in Accra are engaged in at least two income-generating activities. Such multiple livelihood strategies have become “the way of doing things” in many African cities. As a result, the traditional distinction between formal sector and informal sector has become more blurry and complex.

The proliferation of multiple livelihood strategies has significant implications for urban planning in the region. First, it signifies the need to revise African city models to include urban cultivation, a ubiquitous feature of the urban landscape, as a legitimate urban activity. This requires documenting the benefits and disadvantages of urban agriculture and finding ways of creatively integrating the practice into the urban fabric. Second, the house or dwelling as a mono-functional (residential) unit is increasingly out of sync with the reality in many African cities. Many urban residents of different socioeconomic backgrounds have economic enterprises that are located in their homes. Urban planners need to introduce relevant changes in zoning regulations and housing design standards to accommodate home-based enterprises. Third, multiple livelihood strategies also challenge the conventional definition of households and the distinction between urban and rural residence. Historically, households, especially in southern Africa, have used migration as a strategy to overcome limitations of particular local economies. But, involvement in multiple livelihood strategies requires different and more creative living arrangements that allow members to participate in multiple urban and/or rural economies. The final issue relates to the increased involvement of public-sector employees in multiple economic activities and the implications for public-sector efficiency. While participation in multiple economic activities by public-sector employees benefits those directly involved in the practice, the overall impact on society is often negative. As the involvement of civil servants in multiple income-generating activities becomes widespread, the moral authority of supervisors to reprimand moonlighting staff is compromised, especially when the officials themselves are guilty of the same.

are more complicated than they first appear. Roughly speaking, we may divide contemporary African cities into categories, including urban areas with origins in the: (1) ancient or medieval precolonial period; (2) period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade or European trade and exploration; (3) period of formal colonial rule; and (4) postcolonial period. However, it rapidly becomes difficult to differentiate cities by these categories. For instance, take the case of Zanzibar, Tanzania, where an indigenous urban center with origins in the 1100s was refashioned under the domination of outsiders from Portugal in the 1500s and Oman in the 1690s; the city then became caught up in the slave trade and trade with Europe and the Americas in the 1700s and 1800s, then became a British colonial capital, and then the symbolic heart of a postcolonial socialist revolution. Like so many hybrid cities of contemporary Africa, Zanzibar has elements of its fabric that belong to all four of the categories above. Rather than making sharp breaks between city types based on their origins, it is more helpful to simply lay out some of these different types of origin stories and to appreciate that most contemporary African cities are woven together from threads of each origin.

There were at least five major centers of urbanism before 1500, with the oldest being the ancient Upper Nile/Ethiopian centers of Meroë, Axum, and Adulis (Figure 8.5). The medieval Sahelian (or Western Sudan) cities of West Africa’s great trading empires, such as Kumbi Saleh, Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne, arose as middle-agent ports of a network of caravan routes that crisscrossed the Sahara. They achieved significance in the medieval world as nodes of empires, trading entrepots, or centers of learning. Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne were widely regarded for their scholarship in medieval times, but they disappeared or stagnated after the fifteenth century. Timbuktu has about the same population as it had seven hundred years ago, while Gao and Jenne no longer exist. Other early Western Sudan urbanisms survived the new circumstances of the post-1500 world and developed into important contemporary settlements, for instance the Hausa cities of today’s northern Nigeria and southern Niger, particularly Kano, because their nineteenth-century rulers derived great strength from Islamic religious jihad movements.

This adaptation and growth after 1500 was even more common for many ancient and medieval cities of Nigeria, like Oyo, Ilodan, and Benin in the Benin-Yoruba area of early urbanism. The Yoruba cities of southwestern Nigeria had developed metalwork artistry and skill unsurpassed in the first millennium world. Benin-Yoruba cities, and neighboring urban areas further to the west, were well positioned to capitalize on the new trade with Europeans after 1500, as is seen below.

Some of the trading city-states along the Swahili coast and the East African coast more broadly, including Mogadishu and Mombasa, also grew after 1500; but many coastal settlements, like the settlements further to
the southern interior (the Zimbabwean zone of urbanism, in particular) with whom they traded, largely disappeared. The ruins of the Great Zimbabwe in today’s Zimbabwe still demonstrate the remarkable organizational and architectural features of the medieval empire whose central city was located there. The southern interior cities were connected by trade to those along the coast for many centuries before 1500.

Coastal trading centers on the Red Sea and Indian Ocean arose in ancient times, and an extensive trade linking the African interior from Zimbabwe north to Lake Victoria with the Arab and Persian peoples of Asia flourished for more than a thousand years. Beginning in the ninth century, the significance of the Swahili coast ratcheted upward with increased trade with the Arabian peninsula and the Gulf area, based around the export of gold, ivory,
and slaves from Africa in exchange for textiles, jewelry, and other commodities. East African coastal centers such as Kilwa, Malindi, and Mombasa derived their growth, character, and political organization from the encounters and exchanges between the African mainlanders that founded them and small numbers of Arab, Persian, and even South Asian settlers who made permanent homes there. Their rise is considered part of the medieval golden age of Swahili civilization. The greatest of these, Kilwa, now in ruins in southern Tanzania, had diplomatic exchanges with China in the fifteenth century.

Urban Development after 1500

Nearly all SSA urban centers of the pre-1500 era were comparatively quite small, with less than 50,000 residents. Europe’s impact on SSA changed both the locations and the sizes of major centers. European influence began with the Portuguese in the fifteenth century. For about two and a half centuries, most contact between European traders and Africans occurred in coastal installations, from which Europeans gradually developed trade networks for various tropical commodities. The slave trade arguably contributed the most to the development of many coastal trade centers between about 1500 and 1870, but this impact was not an unambiguously positive one. During those years, more than 20 million Africans were forcibly relocated to the Americas or died en route; roughly an equal number died or were displaced within Africa. Nonetheless, it is remarkable how many of the major and secondary cities of coastal West and Central Africa in particular grew up in the midst of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The Portuguese established the first of these towns, St. Louis, in the 1440s at the mouth of the Senegal River, later creating centers at Bissau in today’s Guinea-Bissau; Luanda and Benguela in Angola; and Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) and Mozambique in Mozambique. The Dutch, French, and British followed the Portuguese lead. The Dutch founded Cape Town in 1652, and the French and British established West African coastal towns such as Conakry in Guinea and Calabar in Nigeria. Most towns were merely forts—Accra, for example, was originally the site of Fort Ussher, established in 1650 by the Dutch, and Fort James, founded in 1673 by the British.

During the nineteenth century, the trans-Atlantic slave trade declined, superseded by what was termed the “legitimate trade” in African raw materials. In combination with competition between European firms and states as the century progressed, African urban areas that participated in this increasingly high-volume and high-value trade grew dramatically. Precolonial towns such as Ibadan in Nigeria witnessed considerable growth. The nineteenth century also saw the rise of new or rejuvenated urbanisms in eastern and southern Africa. The city-state of Zanzibar grew into the “island metropolis of Eastern Africa” as the center of a mercantile empire whose tentacles stretched to the Congo. Khartoum emerged in the Sudan. A number of South Africa’s major cities, including Port Elizabeth, Durban, Bloemfontein, East London, and Pretoria, were founded via European settlement.

During the period of European contact before formal colonialism in the 1880s, SSA’s urban geography began to take form, but under constraints. First, most European contributions in settlement development were coastal with minimal impacts in the interior. Second, many coastal settlements were intended as transshipment points for trade and lacked regular urban facilities, except
those structures that served as European housing or as port and defense establishments. Third, there was a lack of diffusion of European technology and culture to the interior's indigenous urban centers.

**African Urbanization in the Era of Formal Colonial Rule**

The European Scramble for Africa lasted from the 1880s through the 1914 outbreak of the First World War. By that point, virtually the entire continent had fallen under European domination. Ethiopia and Liberia remained independent states, and South Africa became an independent, white-minority-ruled state in 1910; but the British, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Belgian, and Spanish colonial powers controlled the rest of SSA. Urbanization followed suit, since social and physical aspects of urban development followed the social and political objectives of these European powers. Colonial regimes moved aggressively into the interior of their colonies; and urban settlements sprang up or expanded from existing towns along infrastructure lines (roads or railroads), near mines or large-scale plantation areas, or in regions requiring administrative centers. Virtually all coastal ports and railheads from Dakar to Luanda became the capitals and/or primate cities in their respective countries, with external trade as their major function. In East Africa, where the resource hinterlands are far in the interior, towns such as Kampala, Nairobi, and Salisbury (Harare) were linked by railways to ports in or near each country, such as Mombasa in Kenya, and Beira in Mozambique. Other East African centers, such as Dar es Salaam (Figure 8.6) and Maputo, became important ports.

In South Africa, the pattern was somewhat different. Major European settlement in the interior pre-dated the formal colonial era of most of SSA (i.e., the 1880s to the 1960s), and major mining and agro-industrial towns were well established by 1900. In South Africa, as a result, there are now numerous urban centers in the interior served by a number of ports all around the southern tip of the continent. The railway pattern is much more intensive, with a high degree of connectivity between urban centers in the plateau hinterland as well as between the interior settlements and the port cities.

In most of SSA, under European colonialism, little real industrialization occurred.
Colonial regimes prioritized the export of minerals, metals, or primary goods to Europe, so that industrial development was most intensive in places like the Zambian Copperbelt (in cities such as Ndola or Kitwe) and the neighboring mining province of Shaba (Katanga) in Congo. In many colonies, and in white-ruled South Africa, severe limits were placed in African residency in urban areas. To support the scale of trade that flowed between Africa and Europe and to control the colonies, larger administrations emerged, leading to an outsized service sector for the comparatively shrunken state of secondary sector activities. Urban services were also generally quite warped by race and class.

As a result of the limited economic opportunities and restrictions on movement, many SSA urban centers remained relatively small until after World War II. The so-called second colonial occupation of the postwar era, when colonial regimes invested in African development largely in an effort to shape decolonization movements away from the influences of the Soviet Union, led to the growth of investments in many urban areas. Relaxation of migration and residency regulations with independence brought massive rural-to-urban migration in SSA.

There are differences between the respective colonial powers (particularly Britain, France, and Portugal) in terms of their legacies in urban areas, but there are also facets of their legacies held in common. British colonies with substantial white settlement developed more highly segregated urban settlement patterns regulated by more rigid building rules and land laws than would be the case for colonial cities in the interior areas of many French West African colonies, for instance. Cities with significant white populations in the colonial era tended to have larger investments from colonial states for infrastructure and from the private sector for industrial development. Yet exceptions to these differentiations existed, and the distinctions between different colonial powers' strategies in urban areas are often overridden by the commonalities. One can still see some distinctly British features of eastern and southern African cities in architecture (many colonial government buildings that are still in use were designed by the British architect Herbert Baker and an army of his protégés) or urbanism more generally (the many small urban parks just adjacent to Central Business Districts (CBDs) with the same strict use rules on signs at their entrance that one sees in London or Hong Kong). Many of the neighborhoods formerly segregated by race are now just as segregated, but by class, as illustrated by the dramatic air photo from the late 1990s in Lusaka, Zambia, of what was until 1964 the whites-only and separately governed township of Roma and the informal settlement of Ng’ombe on its eastern edge (Figure 8.7). Today, Roma is populated predominantly by the African professional class and the political elite of Lusaka, and their maids and gardeners—also African—still live in Ng’ombe, although it is beginning to gentrify (Figure 8.8). Distinctively French architectural or planning legacies are also in evidence up until today in former French colonies. But over time, cities all across the region are becoming more and more alike in their hybrid form and function as the postcolonial era brings unprecedented urban growth to SSA (Box 8.3).

Postcolonial Urbanization

From the 1960s through the 1980s, SSA contained the world’s most rapidly urbanizing countries. Eastern and southern African
countries have led the world in urbanization rates for nearly half a century. Even during the 1990s and 2000s, when many observers noted a slowdown in African urbanization, several countries had estimated urban growth rates near or above 5 percent. In less than 50 years, some eastern and southern African countries have gone from being largely rural societies to being places where almost half the people live in or around cities.

The rapid growth of many cities and the path of urbanization in most countries have been somewhat distinct from what has been seen in other regions, particularly in wealthy European or North American settings. With some exceptions, the extraordinary story of urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa has not accompanied a substantial economic transformation of society toward industry and manufacturing. In some countries,
notably South Africa, industrial development occurred with the urban-ward trends. But in much of SSA, the ever-expanding numbers of urban residents have become increasingly dependent on what are termed informal activities—small-scale, low-technology manufacturing, petty wholesale trading, and informal service provision—for basic needs and daily life (Figure 8.9). Many of these informal economic activities are highly gendered activities that are defined by—and often challenge—traditional understandings of gendered divisions of labor (Table 8.1). Especially in the case of southern Africa, the informal sector is sometimes associated with another problem, HIV/AIDS.

Current Urbanization Trends

Compared to the other regions, SSA still has one of the lowest levels of urbanization. According to UN estimates, only 41 percent of the region’s population will live in urban areas by 2020. There are, however, significant differences in the levels of urbanization within the region. Coastal western Africa and southern Africa have the most developed urban hierarchies. Eastern Africa is the least urbanized (Table 8.2).

Unlike the other regions of the world that play dominant roles in the globalization process, SSA lacks many major “world cities” given its marginality to the world economic system. Although Johannesburg plays a dominant regional role and Lagos is growing in economic importance regionally, most large SSA cities are centers of national economies. Urbanization in the region has continued, but at a slower pace over the last decade in many countries. The proportion of its population in urban areas was 15 percent in 1950; it then jumped to 25 percent in 1970; and it is
Box 8.3 BRICS, Urban Investment, and the Middle Class

The last ten years have brought a profound shift in the sources of foreign investment in SSA, with China becoming the region’s biggest trading partner and donor. Trade between China and Africa is now valued at more than $200 billion. India, Russia, and Brazil are also increasing in significance as trading partners, investors, and donors in the region, and South African investment in the rest of Africa has increased. Of the new players in the development and investment game in Africa, the group of five states which calls itself the BRICS (standing for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are the most significant, especially since they formed a development bank to serve as an alternative to the World Bank, in part with African development in mind.

Traditionally, the interest of BRICS in the region has been tied to natural resource extraction, often impacting urban areas only indirectly. However, a surprising trend has been the extent to which these countries have entered the urban housing and real estate markets. Some of the most dramatic examples have involved the construction of gated communities, high-security suburbs, or even entirely new satellite cities, often built by private firms from the BRICS countries. For example, a Russian firm registered in Cyprus, Renaissance Capital, developed and financed plans for satellite cities in South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, while China’s Henan-Guoji Development Company created nine high-security suburbs in eight different African countries (see Figure 8.8).

This trend is often treated with near-derision, either because of media frenzies over glitzy new ghost cities or because of the galling inequity of luxurious developments in some of the world’s poorest cities. To wit, Kinshasa’s Cité du Fleuve, built by a Chinese-Zambian engineering team on two artificial islands in the Congo River, opened in 2015 with a plan for more than 10,000 luxury apartments with asking prices beginning at $175,000 and a minimum down payment of $50,000—on the edge of a megacity with per capita income estimated at $280 per year. On the other hand, there is certainly a degree to which the new satellite cities and secure suburbs meet the growing demand for high-end housing from SSA’s expanding urban middle class. The most infamous of the BRICS-built “ghost cities,” Luanda’s Chinese-built satellite city of Kilamba, quietly gained 40,000 Angolan residents between 2012 and 2014 by lowering the asking price for its apartments; even though the new low prices were well out of reach of the average Luanda citizen, other Angolans clearly had the cash.

There is a healthy dose of skepticism surrounding the much-ballyhooed rising tide of SSA’s economies, since so much of the growth is in the familiar oil-and-minerals sector, with its notoriously limited benefits for ordinary urban Africans. Yet, across the region, there is no mistaking the expansion of high-end consumerism, as mall after mall emerges in Dakar, Accra, Nairobi, and many others urban settings. A great many cities are witnessing a housing and construction boom to accommodate the new growth of this urban middle class, and the BRICS donors, investors, and engineers are a big part of the story. It remains to be seen how durable SSA’s growing middle class will be, and the same may be said for the BRICS’ interest in them.
now projected to exceed 50 percent by 2040. Between 1950 and 1995, SSA's urban population increased by an average of 5 percent per annum—this represents about twice the average population growth rate of the region. Since then, however, the growth rate has slowed and it is projected to be slightly above 3 percent by 2030. There are also significant variations in the urban population growth rates of the countries in the region.

Although the overall growth of urban population in SSA has slowed in recent years, most of the major cities continue to increase their populations. For instance, the 2015 population of Lagos, Nigeria's metropolitan area is estimated to be over 13 million; Kinshasa-Brazzaville is 11 million; greater Johannesburg 9.9 million, and Abidjan 4.9 million. Between 1990 and 2010, Luanda tripled its population from 1.6 million to 4.8 million, and Conakry doubled its population to 1.7 million. Also, some of the secondary urban centers have experienced some growth since the 1960s due to deliberate government policies to slow the growth of the capital cities.
Table 8.1 Female and Male, age 15–24, in Informal Employment (in percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso</td>
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<td>53.6</td>
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</table>

Source: Global Urban Indicators Database 2010.

Most of the largest cities in SSA are the national capitals of their country. In most cases, the other urban centers are much smaller, except when such cities house major economic activity like a mine or a port. Development efforts have focused on such national cities while ignoring the many smaller urban centers. Most administrative, transport, communications, commercial, educational, and industrial functions are concentrated in the major national cities.

Many SSA cities derive their importance from the role that they played during the colonial and/or postcolonial eras. An important postcolonial SSA urban development phenomenon is the creation of newly planned cities. The first of such cities was the port of Tema, Ghana, built in the early 1960s in anticipation of the country’s industrial development. Several countries have since established new cities as their capitals, including Dodoma in Tanzania, Lilongwe in Malawi, Yamoussoukro in Côte d’Ivoire, and Abuja in Nigeria. These new capitals were meant to give the nation a “fresh start” and to direct growth away from existing cities (Figure 8.10). However, considering that none of the new capitals, other than Abuja, have grown to much more than about half a million inhabitants, one can say that these new cities have not had significant influence on the growth of the already established cities. And in Abuja’s case, the staggering rates of growth that the city has experienced (its population jumped from 800,000 to 2 million between 2000 and 2010 alone) have far outstripped Nigeria’s planning capacity for coping with it.

Another characteristic of SSA urban centers is the importance of port cities. Apart from the landlocked countries in the region and those that have created new capitals, many of the rest of the countries have port

Table 8.2 Urban Population as Percentage of Total Population

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Regions</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2020 Projected</th>
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<td>SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA</td>
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<td>Eastern Africa</td>
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<td>Western Africa</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>49.9</td>
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</table>

cities as their capital city (see Figure 8.1). This is often a carryover from the colonial period when the main function of the capital city was to provide access to the metropolitan country. In addition, SSA’s role during the colonial era as the producer of natural resources led to urban development that was based on resource exploitation. Zambia provides a good example of urban centers that grew out of the copper mining centers. For instance, Chingola grew up around the Nchanga copper mine; Kitwe is at the site of the Nkana mine and Luanshya stems from the Roan Antelope copper mine. Another important feature of SSA’s urban evolution is the increasing importance of tourism cities. Mombasa, the second-largest city in Kenya and the center of the coastal tourism industry, continues to attract immigrants from the interior of Kenya because of the employment opportunities in the tourist industry. Gorée Island, located just off the Dakar Peninsula also attracts many tourists annually because of its slave history. Similarly, Cape Coast and Elmina in Ghana attract many tourists, who are interested in the experiences of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, to the castles from where the slaves were shipped to the New World.

**DISTINCTIVE CITIES**

**Kinshasa: The Invisible City**

About 40 percent of the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s (DRC) population lives in cities, with that percentage expected to top 50 percent by 2040. Kinshasa’s population was conservatively estimated to be 11 million in 2015. This capital city has more than 15 percent of the DRC’s population.
warfare (especially from 1996 to 2002) have hindered Kinshasa's economic development, even while enhancing incentives for Congolese people to migrate to it. Its rapid growth in the last half-century has outstripped the government's political and economic capacity to provide for its needs.

For Sub-Saharan Africa's second-largest city, Kinshasa has a relatively brief and notably turbulent history. The British-American explorer-agent for the Belgians, Henry Morton Stanley, built a new city just adjacent to a set of preexisting settlements in 1881, naming it Leopoldville to honor Leopold II, the Belgian king. A railway connection with the coastal port of Matadi soon made Leopoldville a key town for linking the vast interior of the basin with the world economy, and in 1923 Leopoldville became the Belgian Congo's capital. Eventually, the Belgians extended the city's boundaries; at independence, this expanded entity became Kinshasa.

Kinshasa had only about 30,000 residents in the 1880s, but this had risen to 400,000 by independence in 1960. As was the case in many cities in SSA, colonialism held the population down by enforcing restrictions on urban residence. At independence, the new government ended these controls, opening the doors for massive rural-to-urban migration. For much of the last half-century, the annual growth rate of the city's population has been above 5 percent; it is estimated to have slowed to 3.8 percent for 2010–2020.

Until 1945, most of Leopoldville's Africans lived not in the city itself, but in adjacent riverine settlements. After World War II, new neighborhoods arose, some planned for African workers by the colonial regime. These planned neighborhoods were nearly the only serious investments in African areas of the city made during the Belgian era; Leopold II's Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo that replaced it in 1908 are considered by many scholars to demonstrate the worst case for colonialism's negative impacts, with extremely limited investments in human welfare or security in the colony's capital city. Thus, Kinshasa's infrastructure woes are not entirely the result of warped postcolonial era's politics—the colonial regime failed to provide urban services to African areas even when investing heavily in European areas of the city.

The governments that have ruled Kinshasa since 1960 and the private-sector entities that have invested in the Congo's vast resources have not improved matters. Both government and the formal private sector failed to keep pace with Kinshasa's housing, infrastructure, or employment demands. Despite this, migration to Kinshasa continues to rise. Warfare, violence, hunger, insecurity, and the departure of industries from rural areas drive people to Kinshasa. Their perceptions do not match with realities—some 60 percent of Kinshasa's workforce is estimated to be unemployed; housing and sanitation conditions remain poor; and environmental health problems are rampant.

Population-wise, the largest zones in the city are at the far eastern and far western edges of its urban expanse. Growth in these and other areas is mostly unregulated and uncontrolled. Postindependence efforts to provide public housing, credit facilities, or transport have been marred by gross corruption, mismanagement, and negligence, particularly under the notorious dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled the DRC (which he renamed Zaire) with brutal inefficiency from 1965 to 1997. As a result, Kinshasa's residents do as much as they can informally, outside of the state's purview or the formal private sector. So much of what comprises Kinshasa in both physical and
economic terms is undocumented, giving rise to discussion of it as an “invisible city.” Geographers Guillaume Iyenda and David Simon estimate that three-fourths of Kinshasa's houses are self-built by their owners, often in such close proximity to one another as to prohibit sufficient road construction. Roads, railroads, airports, port facilities, river transport, bridges, and public vehicles in Kinshasa have deteriorated steadily.

Industry in Kinshasa has been declining for 30 years or more. Rioting, looting, and urban violence in the 1990s and 2000s reduced the city's industrial capacity still further. Kinshasa's manufacturing sector still produces many lower-order goods, but in declining volume. The service sector dominates Kinshasa's economy, accounting for three-fourths of all urban activities. Yet, the extraordinary degree of urban primacy that Kinshasa still maintains means that it continues to dominate the DRC's economy, accounting for between 19 percent and 33 percent of all firms or establishments.

Despite the negativity that surrounds most descriptions of and scholarship about Kinshasa, this megacity is a thriving center of the arts, particularly for popular music. Kinshasa's musicians have produced chart-toppers and dance-hall favorites across SSA and Europe for decades, inventing new styles of music and dance and pushing on through every new twist in the city's political and economic malaise. The 2006 democratic elections in the DRC marked a turning point toward peace and stability, and Kinshasa is beginning to benefit from the DRC's tremendous base of natural resources. DRC was once among the top five producers of industrial diamonds in the world, and these are still estimated to account for more than half of the country's export earnings, alongside extensive copper, cobalt, coffee, palm oil, and rubber exports. Such riches have attracted many foreign investors to the DRC, some of whom are investing in real estate and housing ventures in Kinshasa, as the DRC's government begins to invest in long-overdue infrastructure for this megacity. Widespread street protests in 2014 against efforts to change the constitution to allow the president a third term in office, though, were reminders that Kinshasa still faces many challenges on the road to more equitable and democratic government (Box 8.4).

**Accra: African Neoliberal City?**

Ghana's level of urbanization in 2014 was 53 percent, and it is projected to increase to over 63 percent by 2030. The two most important cities in the country are Accra, along the coast, and Kumasi, in the interior. Accra, however, with an estimated 2015 population of 2.3 million, is the undisputed primate city of Ghana. Accra's dominance manifests itself in the political, administrative, economic, and cultural spheres. The country's open economic policies and its relative political stability in a region characterized by instability have also elevated Accra's influence internationally. Accra has experienced a surge in business and industry, becoming a destination for many foreign visitors to West Africa. At the same time, a significant proportion of the city's residents have not benefited from the good economic fortunes.

Accra began as a coastal fishing settlement of the Ga-Adanbge people in the late sixteenth century. Although there were other trade and political centers in the inland of the country at the time, there is no evidence that they were connected in any way to Accra. During the seventeenth century, a number of forts were established in the area by the
Box 8.4 Kinshasa’s Imaginative and Generative Side

Kinshasa is often seen as one of the worst examples of what has gone wrong in SSA’s cities. It has grown very rapidly without corresponding industrial manufacturing growth, enduring decades of mismanagement amidst severe governance crises in the DRC. Its vast sprawl and poor infrastructure are part of why it is often portrayed as an example of relocation: where a city becomes a set of villages distinct and cut off from each other. And yet at the same time, Kinshasa has endured as a major engine of creativity in music and the arts, and its people display tremendous ingenuity in manufacturing the means to survive. In recent years, its residents have farmed its cemeteries and reclaimed stretches of theMalebo Pool in the Congo River as arable land. Filip de Boeck has estimated that Kinois (the people of Kinshasa) have now empoldered more than 800 hectares of the Malebo Pool. More than 80 farmers’ associations govern this vast urban agricultural garden belt essentially outside of government control. What de Boeck calls an “organic approach to the production of the city” certainly does not occur without conflicts, but its freedoms and innovations need to be recognized in any future attempts to come to grips with this megacity. Unfortunately, the creativity of Kinois residents is more frequently subjected to harsh and capricious crackdowns, street-sweeps, or programs of demolition.

The new democratically elected regime of Joseph Kabila has, since the 2006 election, invested heavily in remaking Kinshasa’s downtown, with Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, UAE, or Zambian engineers, contractors, or investors. Ubiquitous billboards advertise the global ambitions for Kinshasa among the DRC’s new elites, including a proposed gated condominium community, La Cite du Fleuve, to be built on two artificial islands in the Congo River. Kinshasa’s artists, such as Bodys Isek Kingelez, have reimagined Kinshasa as well. Kingelez’s most striking piece, Projet pour le Kinshasa du troisième millénaire, is a multimedia model imaginarium for the DRC’s megalopolis in the future, the “Third Millennium.” In all likelihood, the future of Kinshasa belongs to the farmers reclaiming Malebo Pool for their gardens more than it does to the dreamland of billboards or dioramas of its glory. But Kinshasa, far from an “invisible” city, actually makes itself a visible symbol of all that is wrong, but also all that is marvelous, about the DRC.


Europeans. The rise of Accra as an urban center began in 1877 when it replaced Cape Coast as the capital of the British Gold Coast colony. Unlike many SSA capital cities such as Dakar that were selected because of preexisting economic advantages, the choice of Accra was influenced by the colonialists’ desire to find a newer area that would protect Europeans from native-borne diseases. Accra’s new status as the capital made it an attractive location for many merchants and investors, and by 1899 the city had been transformed into
the busiest port on the Gold Coast with the largest number of warehouses. The colonial administration used legislation to limit the development of manufacturing in the city, so at independence in 1957 Accra had developed a reputation not as a factory city but a warehouse city. As the first city in Africa to become the capital of a new nation after World War II, Accra also became an important political center for the struggle for independence in Ghana and in Africa.

Postindependence governments in Ghana continued to promote the city’s development by concentrating governmental functions and economic opportunities in the city and ignoring the other important cities in the country, such as Kumasi. As a result, Accra expanded as the administrative functions for the entire country expanded. In addition, the development of Tema port led to the abandonment of Accra harbor as a commercial port. However, like many cities in Ghana, Accra’s growth began to slow down significantly in the 1970s and 1980s because of the economic crisis that engulfed the country.

The Ghanaian government accepted a World Bank-supported economic reform package in 1983 and agreed to pursue neoliberal economic policies, including the privatization of state-owned enterprises, deregulation of currency markets, promotion of the private sector and foreign direct investment, reduction in the public sector, and trade liberalization. These free-market policies are essential for understanding the contemporary urban economy. The policies helped to transform the state-controlled business environment in the country and encouraged the development of the private sector. It became easier to import many commodities, including building materials, leading to rapid residential development in the city and an expansion in the number of motor vehicles that clutter Accra’s roads (Figure 8.11). In addition, the infrastructure-building program created visible signs of development in the city such as major road

Figure 8.11 A long line of drivers wait for gas at a station in Accra. One of the great ironies in many SSA cities appears in situations where Africans experience shortages of a major export commodity of their own country. Here, the irony is that Ghana is an exporter of petroleum, yet has not been able to keep up with demand in its own capital city. Source: Photo by Francis Owusu.
construction (new thoroughfares and flyovers), upgrading of the international airport in Accra and the Tema port, and the creation of export-processing zones to attract foreign investors. As the hub of Ghana’s economic activities, Accra has also become the host to a number of the national, regional, and multinational financial and business institutions. These economic activities have exceeded the ability of the old central business district to house them, and as a result many of the headquarters are located around the outskirts of the city. The proposed “Hope City” near Accra is one such effort and is expected to transform Accra into an important IT hub and increase its global competitiveness.

Yet, not all residents in Accra have benefited from free-market policies—negative effects of the policies are also visible on the urban landscape. Income levels of most residents have not kept up with the rising cost of living. Lack of employment opportunities for the majority of the residents has widened the gap between the rising, yet small, middle class and the poor majority. The unequal distribution of wealth can be seen from the proliferation of new housing developments on the outskirts of the city, including development of gated communities, luxury apartment buildings, expensive urban shopping malls, and the increased securitization of architecture presumably for protection against crime. Although the crime rate in Accra is low (compared to other SSA cities such as Lagos), the growth of the private security industry in the city reflects the feeling of insecurity among the residents and emphasizes the need to address this emerging problem. The poverty in the city can also be seen from the increasing number of street traders on busy intersections and other hot spots. Many of the poor, including young children, make a living by hawking anything that they can find, especially the ubiquitous water in plastic bags. The effect of the liberalization policy has also been the flooding of the city with vehicles which, combined with lack of comprehensive transportation planning, has created insurmountable traffic problems in the city.

Ghana celebrated its 50 years of independence in 2007, with the country booming with many activities of varying proportions; and, as the nation’s capital, Accra played an important role. In the same year, Ghana also discovered oil offshore and began pumping in 2010. It is hoped that the nationalistic overtones of the 50th independence anniversary and the country’s oil resources will help address the challenges facing the majority of the city’s residents who so far have not benefited from the liberalization of the city but are bearing the brunt of the government’s policies.

The optimism over the future of Accra and Ghana is being tampered by the recent performance of the Ghanaian economy. Following years of growth, Ghana’s economy slowed down to 5.5 percent growth in 2013. This was accompanied by large budget deficiencies, currency devaluation, high interest rates, and rising inflation. To compensate, the government raised electricity and water tariffs. Lack of infrastructure has already been cited as one of the major barriers to growth and this economic decline caused further cuts to public expenditure. Specifically, deficiencies in electrical and transportation systems impact both commerce and residential areas throughout Accra.

Lagos: Largest Megacity of SSA

Nigeria’s population is more than 47 percent urbanized. Lagos, with over 13 million inhabitants in 2015 and over 18 million projected
for 2025, qualifies as SSA’s most populous city and one of the world’s megacities. The development of the petroleum industry in Nigeria has given a boost to urban development, including that of Lagos. It is often said that Lagos owes its growth and dynamism to European influence. Yet, it is also true that Lagos, in its development dynamic, owes much to early African urban development. Lagos was established in the seventeenth century, when a group of Awari decided to cross over the lagoons and settle in a more secure setting on the island of Iddo. They later crossed over to Lagos Island in search of more farmland. In this manner, the three important parts of the city of Lagos were founded as fishing and farming villages by the indigenous population well before the impact of major external influences in the eighteenth century were felt.

Another important historical factor in the development of Lagos is its significance in the slave trade between 1786 and 1851, in which Africans, especially the Yoruba, played an important facilitating role. Lagos was not a slave market until 1760, but it soon became one of the most important West African ports in the slave trade. Lagos Island became an important center where slaves were barricaded as they awaited their export along with primary commodities, particularly foodstuffs and Yoruba cloth, which reached markets as distant as Brazil. Although in 1807 the British passed an act to abolish the slave trade, Lagos, because of its locational advantage, continued the trade until it was halted by the British invasion of the city in 1851, which also caused a temporary decline in the city’s population. With the cession of Lagos to Britain as a colony in 1861, the colonial era for Lagos had begun.

People continued to move into the “free colony,” leaving behind slavery, war, and instability in the interior. Freed slaves also returned from Brazil as well as Sierra Leone and made their homes in Lagos. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Britain intervened to stop internal hostilities and established a protectorate over the whole of Nigeria. A railway from Lagos, begun in 1895, reached Kano in 1912. As its effective hinterland now expanded to the interior of Nigeria, Lagos became even more important as a trade and administrative center. By 1901, the city had a population of more than 40,000, and by this time the future prominence of the “modern metropolis” was pretty much established.

Lagos has experienced spectacular population growth and spatial expansion in the past four decades. Many of the city’s current problems are rooted in its rapid growth. It has been called the “biggest disaster area that ever passed for a city.” That may be overstating it, but Lagos has acute, sometimes incomprehensible, problems of congested traffic, inadequate sanitation, housing and social services, and urban decay.

Lagos is a primate city. The disparity in socioeconomic status between the elite and the mass of urbanites is very wide. That also means the city reflects two contradictory modes of living: one that is an extension of European style brought about by those who can afford the luxuries of a high level of technology and another that is an extension of the traditional mode of living, which has been distorted to fit an urban milieu. This curious amalgam, as it reflects itself in an African urban setting, loses the beauty, charm, and convenience of both of its parts and becomes a nuisance, as exemplified by the traffic congestion and slum dwellings of Lagos.

As a megacity, Lagos has the typical problems of rapid population growth and insufficient employment opportunities. The net
effect of these problems is enormous. It depresses urban wages to almost marginal subsistence levels and adds to the pressure on urban amenities and housing, as well as to numerous other social problems, especially in the slums of Lagos and peripheral residential communities. In fact, an estimated 64 percent of the residents of Lagos reside in slum areas. Lagos is a good example of an African primate city whose growth rates and attendant problems in distorted consumption patterns have created a stifling effect that a weak and often disorganized city government is incapable of handling.

There are, however, some positive developments underway. Abuja, in the vicinity of the confluence between the Niger and Benue rivers, was designated as the new capital city of the country and all government functions have steadily moved to that more central location. This has meant a major step toward decentralization, and it has reduced the concentration of functions in Lagos. Another major development in Lagos that hopes to reshape Lagos’ relations with the global political economy and transform it into a world, or perhaps even a global, city in time is Eko-Atlantic. This new development is expected to include 3,000 new buildings zoned in 10 separate districts on reclaimed land with waterfront areas, tree-lined streets, efficient transport systems, and mixed-use plots that combine residential areas with leisure facilities, offices, and shops. It is projected to house many businesses, 250,000 residents, serve as the workplace for 150,000 people, and support an additional 190,000 commuters. It is expected to help to reverse coastal erosion and relieve some of the pressure on land and resources in Lagos as well as privately administer and supply the city with electricity, water, mass transit, sewage, and security.

Despite these promises, there is a risk in abandoning traditional African cities through the promotion of detached new cities that are explicitly geared toward serving elites and international capital. Further, Eko-Atlantic does not address the problems of Lagos that are discussed above and may indeed exacerbate them. For instance, it is unclear how many jobs would be created beyond those that will be available during the construction phase, and the exclusivity of the new city could promote existing inequality.

Lagos, even in the colonial period, had less than 5,000 expatriates. Hence, compared with Dakar, Nairobi, and Kinshasa, the character of the city and its spatial organization were considerably less a function of the impact of the Europeans. The process that Lagos is undergoing, if there is any recognizable process at all, may throw light on the problems of indigenization of African primate cities that have been, and in most cases still are, enclaves of European economic systems and often are as alien to their people as cities in Europe. Lagos is a bona fide African city and, as disorganized as it is, it may offer a lesson on the transition from a colonial to an indigenous urban environment.

**Nairobi: Urban Legacies of Colonialism**

East Africa has commonly been taken to be SSA’s least urbanized region and, until quite recently, it was estimated that only 20 percent of Kenya’s population lived in cities. That percentage had risen to 24 percent by 2010, and it is expected to hit the 40 percent mark by 2040. Nairobi, the capital and primate city of Kenya, is currently estimated to have 4 million residents. It is a transport hub for much of East Africa, as well as a key site for international diplomacy, and it serves as the headquarters
or conference space for many international organizations. Despite its short history, Nairobi has grown into the major industrial urban center in its region, and the economic engine of Kenya. Nonetheless, it is a city with substantial rates of poverty, great disparities between rich and poor, and faltering urban services.

Nairobi is something of an accident of geography. Sparsely inhabited forest and swampland in the 1890s, Nairobi was by 1906 the site of the new capital of British East Africa (renamed Kenya Colony in 1920). Nairobi became the headquarters of the BEA’s Uganda Railway, conveniently positioned near the Nairobi River and the mid-point of the rail line. The site’s drainage and health problems did not prevent the colonial rulers from seeing the new railway headquarters as an ideally situated forward capital for the colony.

By 1906, the new city contained more than 13,000 people. By 1931, this population had grown to 45,000, nearly 60 percent of whom were Africans. Nairobi became the most important colonial capital in the region, as the seat of Britain’s High Commission for East Africa (including the colonies of Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar). By 1948, the city had more than 100,000 people, and its growth continued steadily through to independence in 1963.

Nairobi’s colonial legacies continue to haunt it. The first element of this legacy is its physical location. It might have been convenient as a site for railway administration and management, and its geographical centrality might have assisted the efficiency of colonial rule; but physically, colonial Nairobi was, as the early colonial administrator Eric Dutton once put it, “a slatternly creature, unfit to queen it over so lovely a country.” Sanitation and urban services more generally lagged—and continue to do so—in part because much of the city lies in or near wetlands.

The second legacy scars Nairobi more heavily, and that is the legacy of colonial segregation. Nairobi was built to be the capital of what its small population of European settlers claimed as a “white man’s country”; and, though Africans were a majority in the city by 1922, most were not legally given rights of residency under colonial rule. When the colonial regime did begin to formally plan for the African areas in Nairobi in the 1920s, these were consistently laid out in the lowest-lying, least-desirable eastern areas of the urban zone. Whites invariably were situated in the higher elevation areas west of Nairobi’s downtown. Since the colonial regime at times also encouraged the immigration of Indians and Pakistanis to East Africa, Nairobi quickly developed a substantial Asian population that took up residence in the middle, literally and figuratively.

Under colonial rule, the Europeans controlled the government, the resources, and the finances of Kenya despite the paltry percentage of the population that they represented. More than half of the urbanized land of Nairobi in the 1960s still remained in white hands, when whites comprised less than 5 percent of the city population. The Asians of the colonial era were mostly shopkeepers, merchants or skilled artisans. Eventually, much of the land of the eastern, African-dominated areas of the city came to be Asian owned. From the beginning, in Nairobi, Africans occupied the lowest ground and the lowest rungs of the economy. Most Africans lived in rented housing built by the city or their employers. The African residential zone of Eastlands, for example, was characterized by high turnover rates, high unemployment, and poor environmental conditions.
Although the tripartite racial geography of the city has faded somewhat in the 48 years since independence, Nairobi remains a heavily divided city, in class terms now as much or more so than in racial terms. The western and northwestern suburbs remain low density elite—albeit increasingly multiracial—areas. Some African elites have moved into traditionally European and Asian neighborhoods, but this is a minority in the upper echelons of political society. Upper Nairobi and the “Nairobi Hill” residential areas continue to be dominated by European single-unit and fashionable homes complete with servants’ quarters. Well-to-do Asians inhabit Parklands, adjacent to the historically European sector. Poorer Asians live in Eastleigh. Some of the Asian population has moved to a second Asian quarter in Nairobi South. The CBD and middle-class or working-class zones predominate in Nairobi’s geographical center, and most of the city east of downtown is dominated by informal squatter settlements. The unregulated growth of the latter has been the major story of the postindependence landscape of Nairobi, and occasionally these interrupt the general geographical pattern. Extensive efforts have gone toward their formal upgrading, but the more significant process of transformation has been toward their densification, as private investors replace shacks with mid-rise tenements.

Although both its growth rate and its economic health have declined in the past 25 years, Nairobi has become a major African metropolis. Its prime city role for Kenya is augmented by its role as an international center for East Africa and even SSA more generally. Nairobi is a prime African example of a “splintering urbanism,” where one portion of the city is highly integrated with the world economy while another larger portion is disintegrated, literally and figuratively. Compared to many SSA cities, Nairobi has had a good record in industry and has an important financial services sector in the CBD. The average European, African elite, or Asian in the city lives in a comfortable home in Upper Nairobi or Parklands and works in the CBD or some other similar enclave. Many African residents are not integrated into the core functions of the city and find themselves locked out of the Nairobi economy that most Western visitors see—as in the development of gated communities for elites in the city. The informal economy provides the overwhelming majority of job opportunities and residences in Nairobi now. Although Nairobi shows evidence of a growing middle class and middle-class housing estates, over 40 percent of the population still resides in informal settlements.

The CBD of Nairobi represents one of the busiest spots in the continent. Its most prominent functions are commerce, retailing, tourism, banking, government, international institutions, and education. It gained unwanted international notoriety with the 1998 bombing of the U.S. embassy and an adjacent office building that caused 284 deaths, all but ten being Kenyans. It returned to the news again with a wave of postelection violence in 2007–2008 that left thousands of Nairobi residents displaced for months afterward. In 2013, al-Shabaab Islamic militants claimed responsibility for a horrific assault on the Westgate Mall just north of the CBD, resulting in more than one hundred deaths and the mall’s total demolition. Despite these tragedies, the Nairobi CBD still provides SSA with arguably its most picturesque and captivating skyline of multistory buildings, and the CBD is ringed by several, even larger, elite shopping malls besides the now-destroyed Westgate.
Box 8.5 Crisis Mapping from Kenya to the Globe

As the postelection violence unfolded in the streets of Nairobi in 2007, a group of bloggers, citizen journalists, and software developers created a website to map reports of political violence in Kenya. The original developers, led by Kenyan activist Ory Okolloh, were all current or former residents of Kenya committed to providing real-time, open-source, participatory spatial information and maps of the violence.

The initial website was named Ushahidi—Swahili for “testimony”—and, by most accounts, it outperformed mainstream Kenyan and international media in covering the grounded realities of postelection violence. The Ushahidi site utilized text messages and Google Maps and allowed crowd-sourced information to be visually displayed on an online, interactive map that built-up “hot spots” of activity. Due to the highly accessible platform, the original Ushahidi site was able to accurately capture the multifaceted dimensions of political violence—mapping both fatal and nonfatal events—with input from over 45,000 users.

Since its inception in 2008, the Ushahidi idea has evolved and expanded into a company with a platform that extends beyond a single website focused on mapping postelection violence in Kenya into a platform with numerous products, developments, and prominent global deployments. The main Ushahidi platform has undergone significant updates since its first release (1.0 Mogadishu, 2.0 Luanda, 2.3 Juba), with release 3.0 currently under development. In addition to the original site, the Ushahidi Platform also provides a number of other products, such as CrowdMap, CrisisNET, Ping, and SMSsync, all designed to provide tools for crowd-sourced mapping and information sharing. The Platform was used extensively in 2008 to map and track anti-immigrant violence in South Africa. The Ushahidi Platform has been deployed in numerous crisis situations outside of the continent as well, most visibly during the 2010 Haitian earthquake. In addition to extensive use of CrisisNET data and CrowdMap to target humanitarian assistance in post-earthquake Haiti, the Platform has also been used to organize global Occupy Movement events, track pharmaceutical supplies in Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, and Zambia, monitor elections in Mexico and India, and build a pollution map in post-Deepwater Horizon oil spill in Louisiana. Ping is a two-way, multichannel alert and group check-in system to ask, “Are you ok?” during an emergency. Like the original Ushahidi site, Ping developed directly from events unfolding in Nairobi, specifically the need for real-time group check-in during the 2013 Westgate Mall attacks. Most recently, the Ushahidi Platform was utilized to map, monitor, and track the Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

According to the Ushahidi team, the core platform is “built on the premise that gathering crisis information from the general public provides new insights into events happening in near real-time.” The team is committed to covering events and geographic regions that typically exist at the margins of mainstream media, with particular attention to sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to these commitments, the Ushahidi Platform is deliberate in showcasing that a cutting-edge software company can arise and thrive from the continent. These commitments were recognized with a MacArthur award in 2013.

Nairobi’s massive congestion, gigantic billboards, neon signs, glitzy hotels and casinos, and elite residents from all over the world make it the ultramodern heartbeat of Kenya and, for many, of SSA. The reconciliation and constitutional changes that have followed the cessation of postelection violence in 2008 brought hope to many Nairobi residents that renewed government attention and reinvigorated foreign investments would reverse their city’s steady decline. The peaceful and fair 2013 elections conducted under Kenya’s popularly endorsed 2010 constitution further solidified this hope. Despite numerous setbacks for the post-2013 government, including trials for the president and vice president in the International Criminal Court for their alleged culpability in the 2007–2008 postelection violence, Nairobi continues to catapult forward toward its ambitions to be a world-class city-region by 2030. While no real reversal of Nairobi’s declining fortunes is in evidence, the city remains a lively and creative cultural center for Kenya and the region around it (Box 8.5).

**Dakar: Senegal’s City of Contradictions**

Senegal is about 43 percent urbanized. With 3.5 million inhabitants, Dakar is a principal primate city in West Africa. The city is known for its beauty, modernity, charm, and style, as well as its agreeable climate, excellent location, and urban morphology. But, of course, this image applies to only part of Dakar. As with Nairobi, Dakar is a city of phenomenal contradictions (Figure 8.12).

The city was founded in 1444, when Portuguese sailors made a small settlement on the tiny island of Gorée, located just off the Dakar Peninsula. In 1588, the Dutch also made the

![Figure 8.12  Fishing boats at Soumbedione fish market in Dakar. Source: Photo by Garth Myers.](image-url)
island of Gorée a resting point. Although the French came to the site in 1675, they did not move onto the mainland until 1857; they used Dakar as a refueling and coal bunkering point. A number of developments expanded Dakar’s functions, leading it to be, in a short time, the most important colonial port on the west coast of Africa. In 1885, Dakar was linked to St. Louis, the old Portuguese port, by rail; and this gave it an added importance as a trading center. Because of its situation and site advantages, Dakar soon became a focus for French colonial functions in the region. In 1898, Dakar became a naval base and in 1904 it became the capital of the Federation of French West Africa. Dakar’s location on the westernmost part of the continent made it the most strategic point for ships moving between Europe and southern Africa and from Africa to the New World. As capital of French West Africa until 1956, it served a hinterland stretching from Senegal in the west to the easternmost part of Francophone West Africa, which included Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Figure 8.13).

After the French moved from the island of Gorée to the peninsula, there was some uneasiness about living in quarters surrounded by African villages. Although a policy of racial segregation was not officially pursued, the French settlers had always wanted to keep the two communities separate. However, only because of a natural calamity that befell the Africans could the French finally accelerate the establishment of their exclusive holdings. Progressive displacement of African dwellings was underway before the outbreak of a yellow fever epidemic in 1900, but the Europeans, invoking sanitation requirements, displaced the Africans at a greater rate afterwards, pushing them northward. Between 1900 and 1902, numerous African homesteads were burned

Figure 8.13  The influence of Dakar extends well inland to the landlocked states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger via the Trans-Sahel Highway. These residents of Mali’s capital, Bamako, share a language with the residents of Dakar: French. Source: Photo by Jared Boone.
down as a “sanitary measure,” and the occupants were relocated after receiving compensation. Another epidemic in 1914 again brought destruction of African homesteads in the south and more relocation of Africans to the north. On the eve of World War II, the French succeeded in almost completely dominating downtown Dakar, often called Le Plateau or Dakar Ville, concentrating Africans in what became known as the African Medina, in the north-central part of the peninsula. The problem of “cohabitation,” as the French called it, was at the root of the whole displacement campaign. Although the colonial authorities would never admit a policy of official segregation, many recommendations were made to openly enforce a system based on race. A commission charged with the study of Dakar in 1889 put forth a recommendation for separate residential quarters for European and African populations. In 1901, another report proposed relocating the Africans outside the confines of the city. A new plan, implemented in 1950–1951, gave further excuse to the colonial administrators to displace more Africans.

The present internal morphology of Dakar reflects this historical background. The city is composed of four main divisions. Although rigid, exclusive ethnic domains are no longer in evidence, Le Plateau still contains one of the most westernized sectors in Africa. It compares easily with any European city—with high-rise buildings, expensive shops, exclusive restaurants, business offices, and many European residents. Characterized by its white-painted, tree-lined boulevards, Le Plateau is the most modern sector of the city, and contains upper-class residential quarters, commercial and retail functions, and government offices and institutions. The African Medina, by contrast, reflects its background as a concentration of Africans into high-density housing projects and bidonvilles (squatter settlements). It is the popular area of the city, is still densely populated, and houses many popular markets and clubs. Its functions are primarily residential, but it also contains shops, markets, and cultural features. It contains the industrial laborers and those employed in the informal sector, both outside and inside the Medina. The population of the Medina, and the adjacent bidonvilles of Ouakem and Grand Yof, is uniformly poor and lives in poorly serviced parts of the city. Recent expansions of the city have also resulted in the development of a sector called Grand Dakar, which contains a variety of neighborhoods ranging from the well-to-do through middle-income and poor sectors and includes a mixture of modern residential quarters, industries, and bidonvilles. There is also the Dakar industrial sector, which houses the bulk of the city’s industrial activities.

Another important part of Dakar that deserves attention is Gorée Island. This island served for many centuries as one of the principal factories in the triangular trade between Africa, Europe, and the Americas. The popular Maison des Esclaves (Slave House) built by the Dutch in 1776 serves as a poignant reminder of Gorée’s role as the center of the West African slave trade. The Slave House with its famous “Door of No Return” served as a place where Africans were brought to be loaded onto ships bound for the New World. The Slave House has been preserved in its original state and attracts thousands of tourists each year.

As with many African primate cities, Dakar faces the problem of rapid population growth. In 1914, the city had a total population of 18,000; by 1945 it had 132,000; and by 2015 it had 3.5 million. Clearly most of the growth is attributable to rural-urban migration, which is characteristic of all Sub-Saharan primate
cities. The rate of natural increase of the city’s population has also been much higher than the national average on account of better sanitation and medical services.

There is no doubt that Dakar is still an important center whose functions reach far beyond its national boundaries. Its ideal location still makes it a center of maritime as well as airline traffic. Many international organizations are located in Dakar because of its geographic situation and agreeable urban environment. Many international conferences and meetings are held there. Above all, it is one of the most favored vacation spots in West Africa for European tourists, especially those from the Mediterranean, who find a familiar climatic comfort in exotic surroundings. Dakar’s position on the coast, however, also leaves the area vulnerable to the projected increase in sea level and coastal erosion and the threats of more flooding and storms throughout the urban region. As many of the tourism locations are situated along the coast, this degradation could also bring a decrease in this important revenue source for the region.

The future of Dakar, nevertheless, depends largely on confronting two challenges. One is to stem the tide of rural-to-urban migration by a sound policy of regional and rural development, including development of satellite cities and subsequent decentralization. Senegal is attempting to stem rural-to-urban migration through the development of “ecovillages.” This strategy focuses on equipping existing communities with the means to utilize solar energy, sustainable water storage, and waste management techniques such as composting. As Dakar continues to grow, developing strategies to sustain rural livelihoods such as ecovillage development could curb the intense urban migration and hold growth at a manageable level for the city. The other challenge, as in other African primate cities, is to bridge the gap between the city’s ultramodern sectors and the bidonvilles and make Dakar a true African city.

**Johannesburg: A Multicentered City of Gold**

South Africa has long been among the most urbanized countries in SSA. Some 64 percent of its population now lives in cities. With more than 4.4 million inhabitants, Johannesburg is the largest city in South Africa. Gauging its population is, however, both easier and more complicated at the same time. On the one hand, the relative wealth of the Republic of South Africa affords it the possibility of keeping more regular and reliable census figures than most SSA countries, and the South African Cities Network is one of the continent’s best repositories of urban data. On the other hand, the reorganization of municipal and local government in South Africa and the presence of Johannesburg in the geographical center of Africa’s greatest example of a polynodal conurbation (many-centered urban area) make it more complicated to decide where Johannesburg begins and ends. The major cities of Ekuruleni (formerly East Rand, 3.2 million), Tshwane (formerly Pretoria, 2.9 million) and Vereeniging (1.1 million residents) are within the metropolitan area of Johannesburg, and other big towns adjoin it as well. Thus the metropolitan conurbation is said to contain more than 11.6 million residents.

South Africa also has the most deeply developed urban hierarchy in SSA. The common issues surrounding primacy in African urban hierarchies are moot here. Johannesburg’s population of over 4.4 million is nearly equaled by Cape Town (3.7 million); eThekwini (formerly Durban) has 3 million, and both Nelson Mandela Bay (formerly Port
Elizabeth) and Vereeniging are over 1 million, giving South Africa seven municipalities with more than 1 million residents. Five more cities have more than a half a million. This significantly dilutes any primacy Johannesburg might claim, although, when one considers the immediate proximity of Tshwane and Ekurhuleni, it is still possible to recognize the greater Johannesburg area and Gauteng Province as the core of the South African economy.

Johannesburg is frequently the only SSA city to be considered a world city (though the global connectivity of Cape Town, eThekwini, and Tshwane is increasingly significant, along with a few other SSA cities). It holds the largest mining and industrial center on the African continent. It is home to Africa’s largest stock exchange, busiest airport, most diverse manufacturing sector, and the ugliest urban racial history in Africa.

Johannesburg owes its establishment and phenomenal growth to the discovery of gold in 1886. The rush of settlers from the south to share in the riches of the land caused the town’s population to increase to 10,000 within a year of its birth. By 1895, hardly ten years after its establishment, the city had about 100,000 people, half of whom were European. Johannesburg was the creation of the mining companies, which until recently probably had more to do in determining the spatial organization of the city than did the civil authorities.

The City of Gold has the unfortunate distinction of having been at the heart of a notorious experiment in social engineering. This experiment was built around the notion of separate development for settlers and the indigenous African population. Johannesburg’s separate development started with the assertion in 1886 that no native tribes could live within 70 miles (112 km) of the site of the new town. When the “native” problem first arose in 1903 and when it surfaced again in 1932, with the creation of the Native Economic Commission, the European settlers argued that Johannesburg had been built by the Europeans, for the Europeans, and belonged to them alone. They maintained that the “natives” were needed for unskilled labor and came to the city to work but not to live in it, mainly because of their inability to handle European civilization. Africans were barred from living in the city and denied permanence of dwelling while they worked in the city; they were restricted to guarded compounds or distinct townships during the tenure of their urban employment. The “pass law” (requiring all Africans to carry passes, or internal passports) begun in 1890 and the “compounding system” (restricting Africans to certain residential areas) contributed to severe urban structural problems with which Johannesburg still has to cope.

Johannesburg became Africa’s largest manufacturing center and a principal center of culture and education. The prosperity of the city was derived from the labors of all the races, but was appropriated by the European minority who enjoyed perhaps one of the highest living standards in the world. Today, the city is clean, with well-planned streets, skyscrapers, and plush residential quarters. The downtown area is similar to that of any industrial city in Europe and North America, with high-rise development to house the offices of the numerous companies, trading firms, and government institutions. In the suburbs of Johannesburg, such as Sandton (which is increasingly an alternative white-oriented CBD), are residential homes for the well-to-do Europeans, whose architecture and amenities match those of their European and North American counterparts.
Separate development became a formal national policy under the name apartheid, after the 1948 election of the white racist National Party in whites-only polls. The Nationalists' apartheid built on decades of gradual evolution and enforced unequal separation in an extremely geographical manner. Apartheid was a socially engineered, hegemonic tool to maintain a privileged status for the European settler population so that its small number could appropriate the vast amount of wealth that was being generated in the country. The impact of this policy was perhaps felt more in places like Johannesburg than anywhere else in the country. Apartheid's application was severely tested in the dynamic environment of Johannesburg, which was attracting a great number of Africans to supply the labor requirements of a rapidly growing industrial conurbation. The authors of apartheid followed a myopic vision by engineering an unsustainable institution of separate development for Africans in their native homelands. They were later forced to tolerate settlements such as Soweto, growing by leaps and bounds in the shadows of Johannesburg. Apartheid was doomed to succumb to the social disorder that its authors never anticipated. The 1976 race riot in Soweto was a watershed in the development of non-racist South Africa. The impatience of the world community with the brutal regime brought moral outrage from outside and increased violence from within. Under the weight of these two dynamics, and aided by a visionary leader Nelson Mandela, South Africa emerged from its nightmare by the early 1990s when apartheid came to a formal end, symbolized by Mandela's election as president in 1994.

The future of Johannesburg lies in how the root causes of urban instability created by apartheid are dismantled while maintaining the city's ability to continue as South Africa's most important industrial and business center. The challenges that Johannesburg faces are evident from what has been happening in attempts to resolve the severe socioeconomic disparities. With the enforcement mechanisms of the apartheid influx control laws gone, an orderly transition from a divided city into an integrated city has been a daunting task for policy makers and city planners. Johannesburg residents long suffered from high rates of violent crime and continuing insecurity. Johannesburg is becoming a megalopolis, as a series of mining towns and industrial areas merge together. The previously marginalized townships such as Soweto and Alexandra are now firmly integrated into metropolitan life. Though still high, income inequality within Johannesburg has declined, as has the violent crime rate. Johannesburg (home to two of the stadiums used to host the final games) led the rest of South Africa in celebrating the success of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in soccer—the first time the world’s biggest sporting event had ever been held in Africa. While controversies persisted over the massive investment in stadiums and infrastructure that hosting the World Cup necessitated, Johannesburg's new Gautrain rapid transit railway, remodeled international airport, fully upgraded highway system, and many other manifestations of FIFA 2010 remain on the landscape, alongside a deep pride among urban residents across the country in South Africa's ability to produce a first-rate World Cup without the mishaps and fiascos many outsiders (almost gleefully) seemed to expect.

With a nonracial central government at the helm and with ample human and physical resources for economic progress, all signs continue to point to a more progressive trajectory for cities like Johannesburg. Success depends
on whether people of all ethnic groups living in the city can deal responsibly with the history of their relations and choose to build a diverse society in which everyone has a stake in the new South Africa's development.

**URBAN CHALLENGES**

*Urban Environmental Issues*

Given the diversity of environments across the continent, the impacts of global climate change in SSA cities are extremely varied. Places in northern and southern Africa are projected to become much hotter and drier in the summers, with increased risks for drought, while drier subtropical regions will become warmer than the wetter tropics. Many of SSA's largest cities are located along the continent's coast and are particularly vulnerable to the threat of rising sea levels (Figure 8.14). Because most SSA cities have experienced more limited industrialization processes than similarly sized cities of Europe, Asia, or the Americas, specifically *urban* environmental problems are often assumed to be of a smaller magnitude. Yet problems of solid-waste management, air and water pollution, toxic-waste disposal, and environmental health are profound issues in much of urban SSA. In part, due to the generally smaller formal industrial sector and smaller manufacturing value-added base in urban Africa, revenues that accrue to urban local government are typically not significant enough to support the broad array of urban services expected of city governments. This array includes environmental management services such as solid-waste management, water and sanitation supply, as well as any form of environmental monitoring or oversight. As a consequence, formal and regulated supply of these services in SSA cities is often

![Figure 8.14](image_url) African cities located in low-elevation coastal zones, such as Monrovia, Liberia, are vulnerable to severe flooding from sea-level rise. *Source:* Photo by Robert Zeigler.
in very short supply. Even in cities with some service provision, access to basic services is typically skewed toward high-income groups and neighborhoods.

Solid-waste services illustrate one crucial example of the interlocking environmental problems facing SSA cities. Many SSA cities with more than 1 million inhabitants report that the proportion of the residential solid waste produced that actually makes it to a landfill ranges from 3 percent to 45 percent, meaning that the majority of solid waste remains in urban neighborhoods. In an earlier era of smaller settlements, the burial or burning of such waste was not a significant problem because its content was overwhelmingly organic and biodegradable. The increasing use of plastics and other inorganic materials, along with ordinary source items for toxic waste (such as batteries and household insecticides in aerosol canisters), and the staggering growth of settlements mean that the lack of proper solid-waste management is a severe crisis for SSA’s urban environments. Buried in congested neighborhoods, solid wastes can and do pollute the water supplies of untold millions of urban Africans. Pollutants sourced to uncontrolled landfills have been shown to enter into the fruits and vegetables urban farmers pluck from downstream gardens in Dar es Salaam, Lusaka, and elsewhere. For example, just along the Roma-Ng’ombe border (see Figure 8.8), urban women gardeners utilize a “rich” section of sewage-infested wetland for growing tomatoes, vegetables, and sugar cane for sale in downtown Lusaka, as well as in the surrounding compounds such as Ng’ombe. Burned on the surface, the waste causes serious damage to the air quality of such neighborhoods. Left in ditches, the waste can inhibit proper drainage, leading to flooding or the increased presence of standing water that becomes a breeding space for malarial mosquitoes. Mounds of waste left for months on the surfaces of African urban neighborhoods provide habitat for vermin that carry serious public health risks.

The interconnected water, sanitation, waste, air quality, and environmental health problems of African cities may in fact be as bad or worse, proportionally, as the infamous environmental crises of Southeast Asian or Latin American megacities. This is because the problems have great potential to magnify one another in the absence of regulation or amelioration. Even where significant industrial development is associated with African urbanization, such as in Nigeria’s oil-rich Niger Delta, Zambia’s Copperbelt, or South Africa’s Gauteng Province (i.e., greater Johannesburg), colonialism, transnational capitalism, or repressive governments (or, in the latter case under apartheid, all three at once) make for a heady combination of roadblocks to environmental control. The levels of heavy metals pollution downstream from the Copperbelt’s largest copper smelter, for example, are mind-boggling, and yet even as the technology exists to prevent or significantly reduce the smelter’s air and water pollution, successive colonial and postcolonial governments for many decades now have shown reluctance to force environmental controls onto an industry that provides more than 90 percent of all of Zambia’s export earnings.

Despite such limited or politically circumscribed capacity for urban environmental management, many African cities are witnessing substantial efforts to bring environmental crisis points under control. In line with the prevailing development models of the day, many cities are experimenting with private-sector urban-service provision, including in environment-related sectors. Dar es Salaam,
as the pilot city for the United Nations Sustainable Cities Program, privatized solid-waste management services and produced an increased rate of deposition from under 10 percent of residential waste to more than 40 percent in less than a decade. Other cities have privatized water supply or even sanitation services. Still more have attempted public-private partnerships where private-sector companies have joined forces with governments to provide services.

Not all of the new innovations have been driven by the private sector, nor have they been automatically friendly to the environment. For instance, South Africa’s post-apartheid regime has carried out a policy of free basic water provision that did increase the supply of clean water for the poor; but many critics point to the limitations in that system that are causing poor urbanites to seek unclean water alternatives, exacerbating a cholera epidemic. In other cities, the driving forces for change in urban environmental management belong with grassroots community groups, such as Nairobi’s Mathare Sports Club, whose local environmental planning and consciousness raising earned them global attention at the World Summit on the Environment in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 that, in turn, improved the club’s soccer match gate revenues. Regardless of the paths taken, though, it is clear that much more needs to change for African cities to gain control over the daunting array of environmental problems confronting them.

Primate Cities

Urban primacy continues to dominate the African scene (Figure 8.15). Indeed, one of the more significant factors in urban transformation in Africa in the post–World War II and postindependence period has been the dramatic growth of the primate cities. Primate cities contain more than 25 percent of the total urban population in SSA. In places such as Lesotho, the Seychelles, and Djibouti, primate cities contain 100 percent of the urban population. Primate cities in SSA are also not limited to small countries such as Burkina Faso or Guinea-Bissau; they can also be found in such large countries as Angola or Mozambique. Generally, in those countries where urbanization has had a relatively long history, the ratios are lower. But the degree of primacy will continue to be a significant pattern in Africa’s urban development for quite a long time (see Table 8.2).

In the 1960s, most primate cities in Africa accounted for about 10 percent of the urban population. By the year 2000, many cities, such as Kinshasa, Lusaka, Accra, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Luanda, Dakar, and Harare, increased their share of their respective nation’s urban population to over 20 percent. Currently, many primate cities account for over 30 percent of the urban populations in their respective countries. It is also important to note that, since the second half of the 1980s, some encouraging signs of deconcentration around primate cities have been observed and the ratios of urban populations that reside in primate cities seem to be stabilizing. For instance, between 1990 and 2005, the share of the urban population in the primate city in several countries has declined. The decreases in the percent of urban population in the largest city were highest in Angola, Burkina Faso, and Guinea.

While the dominance of primate cities in SSA has historical roots traceable to colonial administration policies, postcolonial governments have perpetuated this pattern by making them the centers of modern development
and governance. SSA’s primate cities dominate the political processes, often reinforcing the status quo but sometimes creating avenues for change (Figure 8.16). For example, urban political processes in some SSA cities have created new spaces of engagement, particularly for professional women. For example, women comprise over 30 percent of parliament in Burundi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Angola, Uganda, and South Africa (in comparison, the female representation in the U.S. Congress is less than 20 percent) and over
25 percent of ministerial positions in Niger, Burundi, Mozambique, Gambia, Uganda, Lesotho, South Africa, and Botswana. Formal and informal solidarity organizations and movements of women, operating in SSA's primate cities, have also emerged as significant agents of change. The Liberian peace movement, for example, was heavily influenced by such coalitions of women and ultimately ushered in SSA's first female head-of-state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Primate cities in SSA not only tend to be the capital city of the country; they often also have more disproportionate influence than is warranted by the magnitude of the populations living in them. They dominate the political, economic, infrastructural, and cultural scene of their countries. The strong influence that they exercise also enables them to preempt a good portion of the national social and industrial investments. Concentration of power in these cities has produced large disparities in standards of living between those who live in them and the population in the rest of the country. Primate cities also have some of the most serious urban problems in the region. These include mounting unemployment and the resultant increased crime and youth unemployment; severe housing problems, reflected in overcrowding and the spread of slums and squatter settlements (over 80 percent of the urban populations reside in slums in Mozambique, Niger, Angola, Chad, Central African Republic, and Sierra Leone); and immense pressures on urban infrastructure and services such as water, sewage, and transportation.

**Rural-to-Urban Migration**

Between 50 and 60 percent of the urban growth in SSA comes from rural-to-urban
migration of young adults seeking jobs and other livelihood opportunities in urban areas. This migration is one of the most crucial problems facing African governments at present. A massive flow of people into the few urban centers that became the locus of power and investment, particularly in the period following decolonization of the continent, has strained the carrying capacity of most urban centers. Concern about the rate of SSA urbanization would hardly seem justifiable, considering the very high magnitude of its rural population. However, the urban growth pattern, often dominated by the primate city and the high rate of growth of such centers, is far beyond the capabilities of the urban socioeconomic system to generate the needed employment opportunities, housing, and social services. As a consequence, the primate city has become, in most instances, a liability to the overall development process.

The paradoxical fact that rural-urban migration continues to grow in spite of rising unemployment in urban centers of the Global South has given rise to a migration theory based on rural-urban income differentials. This theory assumes that migration is "primarily an economic phenomenon" and that the potential migrant makes a calculated move in order to realize much higher "expected" earnings with varying probabilities. According to this theory, the wide differences between urban and rural wages, coupled with the fact that the long-run probability that a migrant could secure wage employment in the urban area, explains the motives behind the increases in rural-urban migration. The structural adjustment programs implemented across the region were meant to bridge this gap by increasing the prices of agricultural exports and instituting payment for previously free or subsidized services consumed mostly by urban dwellers.

Rural-to-urban migration in SSA is also explained with reference to "push factors" that operate in rural areas and "pull factors" that attract migrants to urban areas. The push factors include the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in rural areas, including lack of access to agricultural land, which literally forces people to leave rural areas. The pull factors emphasize the attractions and socioeconomic opportunities available in urban areas. The economic opportunities in urban areas, as well as social, cultural, and psychological factors including escaping social controls in rural areas, also attract people to urban areas.

Whether rural-to-urban migration in SSA is caused primarily by the difference in expected wage from migration (urban wage) versus an agricultural wage or the balance between pull and push factors might be open to debate. It is important to note that more recent evidence seems to suggest that rural out-migration has not only abated in SSA, but that its countercurrent (i.e., urban out-migration) has progressed and even, in some cases, surpassed the rural-to-urban flow of people. For instance, a number of major towns and cities in Ghana and Zambia experienced a negative migratory balance between the 1970s and 1980s. Zambian census data also indicated that the population of some urban areas decreased between 1990 and 2000, due in large part to growth in some secondary cities, but also due to opening up large farm blocks and resettlement schemes designed to attract some urban dwellers and retirees. Similar patterns have been observed in the Francophone West African countries of Burkina Faso, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal, where many secondary towns registered a negative net loss of migrants between 1988 and 1992. In some
of these countries, the net migration rates of rural areas suggest that rural-to-urban migration may not be as important as expected or that the reverse movement has increased.

While the apparent slowdown of rural-to-urban migration is important, the fact remains that the SSA primate city is a major factor in the contradictions between urban and rural life. Because of its monopoly of economic opportunities and political power, the city has created a perception on the part of rural-urban migrants of certain and immediate opportunities for socioeconomic improvement, a perception that is rarely realized. The phenomenal growth of shantytowns and squatter settlements and the proliferation of informal employment in the cities of SSA are the result of this miscalculation (Figure 8.17).

**A HOPEFUL VIGNETTE**

Namushi comes from a family of seven—four boys and two girls living with their mother—and was born in Mabumbu village in western Zambia. Throughout her childhood, Namushi and her family survived on what they managed to grow from their fields, together with any small temporary jobs, to access limited cash. Often times, Namushi’s family struggled to provide more than one meal a day. At the age of 20, Namushi, along with four boys from

![Figure 8.17](image-url)  Getting hair cut and styled is one of the basic services provided by every culture. Around Kaunda Square in Lusaka, entrepreneurs earn a bit more by adding telephone services to their business model. *Source: Photo by Angela Gray Subulwa.*
her village, made the (mis)calculation to set out for the capital city of Lusaka in search of a better life. According to Namushi, she set out with an unquestioned belief in the socioeconomic possibilities that life in Lusaka would offer.

Upon arrival, Namushi quickly realized that her beliefs and perceptions about life in Lusaka were indeed miscalculations. Her childhood in rural, western Zambia did not equip her with the tools (linguistic or otherwise) to easily navigate and negotiate the complexities of life in Lusaka. Although she struggled to learn Nyanja and English, she remained committed to the idea that succeeding here would translate to success for her entire family back home in Mabumbu. For the first few days (before they could locate anyone who lived in the city from Mabumbu's nearby villages), Namushi and her four travel companions slept at the bus station and set out each morning in search of employment. Luckily, Namushi was able to secure employment as a housemaid in the suburbs of Lusaka by her third week in the city.

For the next year, Namushi worked as a housemaid, while sending a significant portion of her earnings back home to her village. It was during this time that Namushi was able to improve her English, which later helped secure better employment at a newly opened gas station. While working at the gas station, Namushi realized that she would continue to struggle and fail to realize her goals if she continued to send all of her earnings directly home to Mabumbu. She decided to reduce her remittances to the village and direct some of her income into savings, with the goal of opening a small business in the nearby compound, Kaunda Square. Over the course of a year, Namushi saved enough cash to construct a small, mobile store (katemba) from which she sold vegetables, candy, candles, salt, and the daily essentials of life in the compound. As her business stabilized, Namushi continued to save cash, hoping one day to open a larger, permanent-structure grocery in the compound market area. Within three years of saving and navigating the intricacies of grocery marketing in the compounds, Namushi finally succeeded as she opened her grocery in Kaunda Square in 2005.

When asked, Namushi characterizes her successful navigation of life in Lusaka as a story of constant negotiations and calculations of risk, coupled with the determination to survive that she learned from her grandmothers back in Mabumbu. Namushi reflected on the overlapping challenges that she faced—coming from a rural area, navigating the informal urban economy, lacking any support system or network, and most critically doing all of this as a woman. As a woman, Namushi felt compelled to carry herself a “bit rough” in order to guard against those who saw an opportunity to take advantage of a young, single, rural woman in the city. Another problem she faced as a woman entrepreneur in the informal economy was the issue of transportation (from the wholesalers to the compound). Namushi found it difficult to secure transport without the fear of being taken advantage of by the overwhelmingly male drivers—fears ranging from simply being overcharged to fears of thieves and even fears of being raped along the way. Another obstacle Namushi faced came from the wholesalers themselves (in Lusaka, the wholesale market is dominated by men of Indian descent). Namushi often found herself served last even if she arrived first. And while her male counterparts were able to negotiate for small credits and loans on their wholesale purchases, Namushi was unable to negotiate
similar deals. In the face of all of these obstacles, Namushi did succeed in opening her small, permanent grocery shop on a busy corner near the Kaunda Square vegetable market in 2005 (Figure 8.18).

By 2010, she had expanded her original grocery shop and had opened another six shops in Kaunda Square (three additional groceries and three cosmetics/pharmacies). Namushi returned to Mabumbu, collected her four brothers, and returned with them to Lusaka. The boys assisted Namushi in maintaining and expanding her shops, often mediating some of the gender constraints that remain in Lusaka's informal economies. While her brothers helped her with the shops, Namushi sent her nieces to school, in the hopes that they will do greater things than she had accomplished herself.

SUGGESTED READINGS


