JOINT RESEARCH BRIEF

Governing Africa's urban transitions - Harnessing opportunities

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Foreword

In less than five years, African cities will account for the majority of Africa's population. Already, they generate nearly 60 percent of the continent's gross domestic product. In other words, the economic fortunes of African countries and of Africa as a whole are closely tied to the economic performance of its cities and regions, which in turn depends largely on how they are administered and managed.

The great merit of this Policy Paper on "Governing Africa's Urban Transitions" published by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation is that it sheds light on the political dimension of the governance crisis facing African cities and regions, and emphasizes the urgency of providing appropriate solutions; otherwise, these cities and regions will be unable to play the role expected of them in achieving the structural transformation of Africa called for by the African Union's Agenda 2063.

Indeed, without an appropriate, effective, and efficient governance system, it will be difficult for African cities and regions to meet the challenges of planning and management of African cities and regions in the face of the continent's rapid urbanization; adapting to and building resilience against climate change; drastically increasing their investment capacity to cope with population growth, the urgent need for economic development and job creation, and the imperative to improve the living conditions and environment for their populations.

The assessment presented in this Policy Paper is clear: The long-held assumption that laws and regulations enacted by national or local public authorities—which are supposed to safeguard the public interest—are sufficient to ensure effective and efficient governance of African cities and regions has been disproved by the facts. These laws and regulations actually apply to only a limited portion of the actual city or territory and often have negative impacts on the lives of most residents. The governance rules actually applied result in reality from ongoing interactions between public authorities and civil society actors; the formal and informal sectors of the economy; traditional authorities and modern state authorities; the legal city and the real city, etc.

These interactions lead to the recognition and acceptance of the co-creation and co-management of cities and regions by all stakeholders as an inescapable reality, and the basis for the negotiation and adoption of resulting rules, methods and tools appropriate for the governance of African cities and regions caring for resilience, inclusiveness, and accountability, essential conditions for their acceptance and adherence by all stakeholders.

How should we proceed?

The proposed twelve policy actions (four for each of the three priority areas of intervention) serve as a valuable guide for those seeking to embark in the design and implementation of needed innovations in sync with the realities faced by local populations, for the positive evolution of governance in African cities and regions.

Furthermore, by identifying the responsibilities assigned to the various stakeholders for an effective implementation of these innovations, the Policy Paper also serves as a call to action which, if heeded as it should be, would help set in motion a positive dynamic aimed at the continuous improvement of governance in African cities and regions, for the benefit of their residents.

Jean Pierre ELONG MBASSI
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CORE QUESTIONS

How can African governance systems manage rapid urban transitions in ways that strengthen institutional capacity, accountability, and inclusive economic growth?

What does inaction cost the continent when weak urban governance locks in inequality and lost prosperity?

KEY FIGURES

1.4 billion
projected urban Africans by 2050

60-75%
of urban growth in informal settlements

0.58 Gini
average inequality coefficient - world's 2nd highest urban inequality

Executive Summary

Africa is at an urban crossroads as the fastest urbanising continent. By 2050, over 1.4 billion people will live in African cities. This is not simply a demographic shift; it is a governance challenge of continental proportions. Urbanisation is accelerating faster in Africa than anywhere in human history, yet the systems of governance, finance, and economic inclusion needed to manage it are failing to keep pace. The result is a growing gap between the promise of urban urban development and the reality of deepening inequality, environmental stress, political instability, and displacement.

The stakes are high and directly measurable. Over 60% of urban growth is absorbed into informal settlements where state services rarely reach. Average urban inequality, at a Gini coefficient of 0.58[1], is among the highest in the world. Only 12 of Africa's 54 states maintain governance environments, genuinely enabling city governments.[2] Systemic urban governance breakdown is not a passive problem; it is an active driver of inequality, lost prosperity and migration flows* that are reshaping political systems across both Africa and Europe.

The brief is organised around three analytical domains and one cross-cutting structural argument: that urban governance shortcomings in Africa are political, rather than technical in origin. It reflects a settlement that generates rents for elites, criminalises informal economies, and extracts resource wealth with limited domestic value addition. Reforming this settlement demands deliberate power shifts, not merely institutional adjustment.

Africa's urban challenge is not simply demographic. It is fundamentally a governance challenge

* Movement of people is not just felt in cities. From urban to urban; rural to urban; urban to rural transboundary; movement is not linear

To seize opportunities, Africa may have to reconsider its strategic resourcefulness in critical minerals and continental financing mechanisms to drive equitable and inclusive urban development.

Three Domains of Analysis and Action

Domain 1: Urban Resilience Systems. African cities already generate resilience from below, yet formal institutions systematically criminalise or ignore this capacity. The governance imperative is to reverse this and embed community-led resilience into formal planning frameworks. This is to be seen as complimentary.

Domain 2: Governance and Political Inclusion. African cities are not governed by a simple state-versus-informal binary. They are governed by overlapping, contested, and fragile political arrangements in which forbearance, patronage, youth mobilisation, and digital power, each play decisive roles. Governance reform must work within this complexity.

Domain 3: Political Economy, Finance, and Collective Action. Financial dependencies and raw mineral export models continue to drain the fiscal resources needed for sustainable urban transformation. For instance, Africa's share of global manufacturing remains at less than 2%, down from 3% in the 1970s.[3] Redirecting these flows toward domestic investment is the structural precondition for everything else. Repositioning Africa to lead the global energy transition with critical minerals is a lever for the continent.

Three cross-cutting imperatives apply across all domains that can harness multi-pathways to transition:

- Decolonising urban planning frameworks
- Embedding gender and intergenerational equity in governance design
- Building African data sovereignty

The paper closes with a direct account of how governance inaction translates into migration pressure, making the case that urban governance reform is also simultaneously about development investment, migration policy, and geopolitical strategy.

Urban transformation requires resilience from below, political inclusion and fiscal capacity to move together

Context: Africa's Urban Inflection Point

Africa is the last major world region to complete its urban transition, and it is doing so faster than any of its predecessors. Over 40% of Africa's population now live in cities, expected to rise to 50% by 2035.[4] Despite the world's ten fastest-growing cities being African, urbanisation is occurring without the structural transformation that historically accompanied it elsewhere. Labour productivity across Africa remains approximately 50% below Asia's and just 12%[5] of the United States, a measure of how urban density is failing to generate the productive, inclusive economies it should theoretically enable.

African cities represent centres of high-utility adaptive capacity rather than structural failure. Current urban resilience, manifested through grassroots agricultural networks, community-led health frameworks, and decentralised fintech ecosystems, provide a pre-existing foundation for urban transformation.

Capacity reform without power reform risks technical compliance without substantive change

Four Structural Forces Shaping the Transition

1. Service deficits: less than 25% of urban Africans have access to basic water and sanitation[4]; public transport systems operate below capacity or have collapsed; and 60–75% of urban growth is absorbed into informal settlements.[6]
2. The geopolitics of critical minerals: Africa holds approximately one-third of known global reserves of cobalt, lithium, manganese, and rare earth elements (the inputs of the global energy transition), yet continues to export raw materials rather than value-added products, generating minimal domestic economic value.[7]
3. Climate change: flooding, extreme heat, and infrastructure collapse compound existing vulnerabilities, disproportionately in the informal settlements where most urban growth is concentrated.
4. Economic dependencies: historically, exclusionary financial systems continue to act as constraints on African governments affecting major monetary policy decisions

The Political Economy of Governance Failure: Why Systems Fail and Who Benefits

Understanding why urban governance fails in Africa requires moving beyond technical explanations. Governance failure is not accidental, nor limited to usual explanators of low capacity, inadequate finance, and staggered political support. It reflects a political outcome that benefits elites with power at the expense of those without access. This reveals the structural problem that governance reform focused only on institutional capacity, without redistributing power, will produce technical compliance without substantive change.

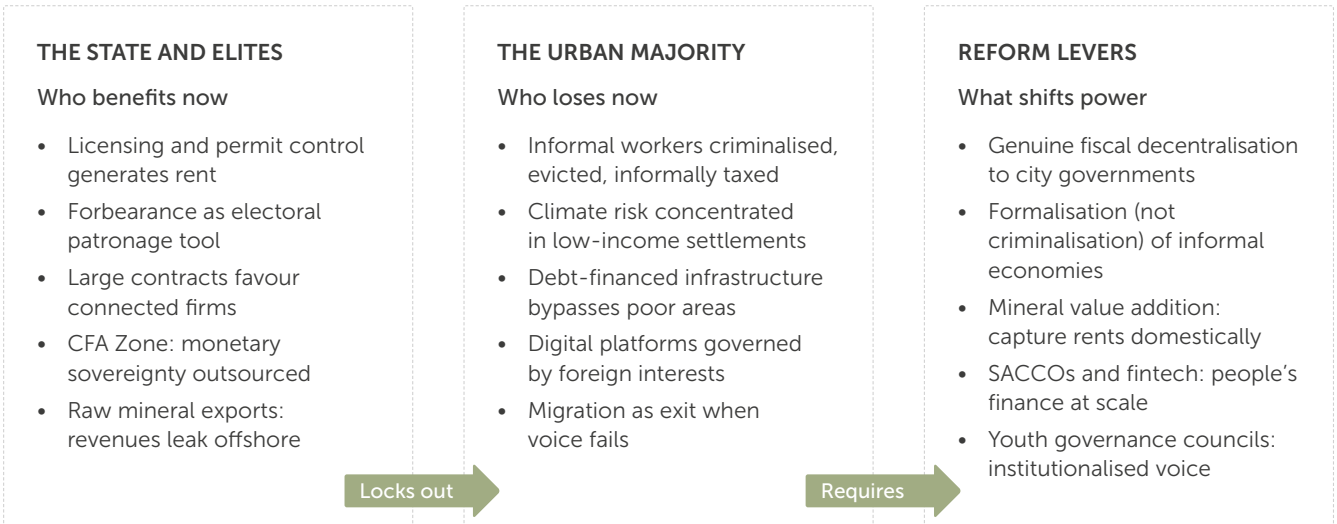
Who Benefits from the Status Quo

The recentralisation of power in the case of Kampala City by the executive has undermined dynamic urban decision-making where power is reduced from the city council to the president's office.[9] In comparative cities such

as Accra, Nairobi, and Dar es Salaam, political elites deploy forbearance (selective non-enforcement of law) as a patronage instrument, protecting informal settlements or traders when it serves electoral interests and evicting them when commercial interests demand. Across Africa, colonial economic frameworks, including the CFA Franc Zone, bilateral trade structures, and development finance architectures that route decision-making through Paris or Washington rather than Dakar or Lusaka, continue to extract value from the continent. The informal economy, which employs 66–85% of urban Africa's workforce and generates 60–75% of urban economic output, is systematically excluded from the planning, investment, and regulatory frameworks that shape city futures.[11]

The informal economy, which employs 66–85% of urban Africa's workforce and generates 60–75% of urban economic output, is systematically excluded from the planning, investment, and regulatory frameworks that shape city futures

Diagram 1: The political economy as a flow of power and resources, identifying who benefits, who loses, and what specific reforms are required to shift the balance:



Africa's Urban Governance Landscape

Urban governance is not a binary of formal state versus informal sector. It is a multilayered, contested, and constantly shifting system of actors, norms, and power relations operating simultaneously at national, city, and neighbourhood scale. Any realistic approach to governance reform must begin with an accurate picture of who governs African cities. Governance reform that targets only formal institutions will be captured, circumvented, or undermined by the actors it ignores, including a breach of the social contract. Effective reform must navigate this landscape with its full complexity in view.

DOMAIN 1: Urban Resilience Systems

African cities are routinely exposed to shocks: economic collapse, pandemics, flooding, and political upheaval. How cities survive these shocks is rarely the result of formal government action; it is almost always the result of community-organised responses that operate outside, around, or despite formal governance systems. This capacity is Africa's most undervalued urban asset. It is also its most endangered, because the formal governance frameworks that should support it instead systematically criminalise, ignore, or displace it.

What Is Happening in Practice

Evidence from Harare and Lusaka reveals a consistent pattern: when formal governance fails, communities substitute for the state.[12] In Harare, the collapse of formal food systems led residents, predominantly women, to build informal urban agriculture networks and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) supply chains that sustained livelihoods, yet these remained illegal and subject to eviction, limiting their productivity and scalability. In Lusaka, the COVID-19 response in informal settlements was led not by the state but by community actors - local leaders, religious organisations, and civil society - who delivered health services through existing social networks. While effective, these systems operated without formal support, resulting in uneven coverage, unpaid labour burdens, and weak integration into public systems. The governance gap between community-led responses and formal institutions is costing lives and development. Governance gaps create selective service provision, fragmenting systems, social economic costs and constraining long-term planning. In Diagram 2 below, the governance gap lies between Stage 3 and Stage 4. Formal institutions rarely reach this transition.

> Africa's most undervalued urban asset may be resilience organised from below

Diagram 2: The urban resilience cycle. Five stages from crisis to systemic transformation, with governance integration as the critical gap

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5
SHOCK / CRISIS	**CITIZEN RESPONSE**	**KNOWLEDGE GENERATION**	**GOVERNANCE INTEGRATION**	**SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION**
Economic collapse, pandemic, flood, or political upheaval	Grassroots improvisation: urban agriculture, community health, informal finance	Local networks produce adaptive solutions outside formal systems	Economic collapse, pandemic, flood, or political upheaval	Resilience embedded in planning; next crisis managed better

Source: Adapted from Ndlovu, 2026, pp. 67–76

Resilience is thus not politically neutral. In many African cities, the state is itself a producer of the vulnerabilities that community resilience must then manage, through evictions, by-law enforcement targeting informal livelihoods, and spatial planning that concentrates risk in low-income areas.[14] Lwasa synthesises these cases into a framework identifying urban agriculture, MSMEs, sociotechnological innovations, and institutional transformation as the critical enablers for just urban transitions, and argues that cities should combine centralised infrastructure systems with diverse community-led alternatives rather than treating them as competing options.[15]

Why Current Systems Fail

Systematic Criminalisation of Survival: Formal governance frameworks treat community-led survival strategies, such as urban agriculture and informal MSME supply chains, as illegal. By prioritising eviction and by-law enforcement over support, the state actively undermines the systems that sustain cities during crises.

The "Governance Integration" Gap: There is a structural breakdown between grassroots innovation and formal policy (between Phase 3 and Phase 4 of the Resilience Cycle). Institutions fail to recognise, resource, or scale local solutions, leaving resilience fragmented, undercapitalised, and reliant on unpaid community labour.

Institutional and Regulatory Blindness to Plurality: Reform efforts target formal institutional structures while ignoring the multilayered systems of actors, norms, and power that actually govern cities. As a result, reforms are routinely captured, bypassed, or rendered ineffective.

State-Produced Vulnerability: The state often generates the very risks it seeks to manage, through evictions, exclusionary planning, and the concentration of vulnerability in low-income areas, forcing communities to absorb the consequences.

Zero-Sum Infrastructure Logic: Governance systems treat centralised infrastructure and community-led alternatives as competing rather than complementary. This prevents the development of hybrid systems that combine scale with adaptability, limiting pathways to just urban transitions.

Displacement of Responsibility and Hidden Costs: Governance gaps create selective service provision, often shifting responsibility onto communities. This creates fragmented systems, constrains productivity, and imposes economic and social costs that undermine long-term urban development.

> Governance gaps do not eliminate service provision - they displace it onto communities

Policy Pathways

Policy Pathway 1: Institutionalise Citizen-Led Resilience

Municipal governments should embed community-led resilience systems into urban planning through participatory budgeting, neighbourhood planning committees, and urban observatories that formally integrate local knowledge into decision-making. Crisis response frameworks must be co-designed with community actors, while planning systems should recognise and support existing livelihood systems. This framework formally incorporates existing livelihood systems - such as urban agriculture and informal MSME networks - into statutory land-use plans, transitioning the state's role to a partner in resilience.

Policy Pathway 2: Mandate Resilience Impact Assessments

Continental development finance institutions should mandate Resilience Impact Assessments Continental development finance institutions should mandate Resilience Impact Assessments for all urban infrastructure investments. These audits evaluate how proposed projects interact with informal ecosystems and identify who carries the residual risk of failure. Projects that undermine local resilience must include community-validated mitigation plans, ensuring infrastructure strengthens rather than displaces existing coping systems.

Policy Pathway 3: Formalise Urban Agriculture as Core Infrastructure where possible

The 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance sub-indicator Sustainable Use of Land & Soil has a continental score of 35.5 which although rising by 4.8 points in the decade between 2014 and 2023 is still low scoring. The improvements of this sub-indicator are largely driven by sustainable practices within agriculture as well as diversification.

The African Union should enact a unified framework that elevates Urban and Peri-urban Agriculture (UPA) from a subsistence activity to a protected economic sector. This policy secures urban food systems by providing statutory land-use protections, guaranteed water access, and integration into MSME support networks. By treating agricultural land as a critical urban asset that cannot be converted without community consent, cities can leverage UPA to scale existing communal practices, drive green job creation, and enhance climate adaptation. UPA can also offer co-benefits of biodiversity enhancement, risk reduction and synergies with grey-infrastructure in treating waste, cooling cities and reducing flooding.

Policy Pathway 4: Build Resilience Capacity in Secondary Cities

National governments should establish dedicated resilience governance units in secondary cities where most urban growth is occurring, but institutional capacity is weakest. Adopting the "Special Planning Area" model, these units combine national technical support with localised statutory authority. This decentralised approach should combine technical support with participatory governance to deliver integrated, community-led urban planning and infrastructure development, including innovative financing.

DOMAIN 2: Governance and Political Inclusion

The governance of African cities is being shaped by forces that rarely appear in institutional reform frameworks: patron-client forbearance networks, youth protest movements mobilising digitally without party structures, and smart city platforms built by external actors embedding foreign governance logics into African urban infrastructure. Governance reform that maps onto an institutional diagram of formal actors will miss most of what actually governs African cities.

Technology Geopolitics: Who Governs Digital Urban Infrastructure

African cities are being governed, in part, by the architecture decisions of external technology providers. Smart city initiatives in Kigali embed Chinese surveillance infrastructure; Western fintech platforms govern financial flows in Nairobi; global logistics systems shape economic governance in Lagos. Each of these embeds an external governance logic and a data extraction architecture that operates outside any formal accountability framework. Africa's critical mineral position (cobalt, lithium, and rare earth elements are essential to the digital economy) gives it genuine leverage to negotiate technology transfer, data sovereignty, and genuine industrial partnerships, but only if this leverage is coordinated and strategic at a continental level.[18]

A New Politics of Urban Accountability

There is a generational shift that is arguably the most important political development in African cities today. Kenya's 2024 Generation Z (Gen-Z) protests, Nigeria's 2020 #EndSARS movement, and Uganda's #KampalaPotholeExhibition each triggered breached social contracts, a new form of urban political agency: digitally organised, party-less, leaderless, and demanding substantive accountability rather than patronage access.[19] These movements are challenging traditional urban governance theories that locate power in formal institutions and political elites. They represent a governance resource that reform programmes systematically fail to engage.

Urban governance operates through negotiated, informal systems, and the real foundation of accountability lies in communities' ability to organise, rather than in formal institutional design alone. Across African cities, formal governance frameworks do not reflect how services are delivered. In Nairobi's Mukuru settlements, where basic service access is extremely limited, non-state providers fill critical gaps in water, sanitation, and electricity, often operating through informal arrangements with state actors.[20] In Kampala, governance functions through forbearance: in Ggaba, political networks enabled settlement security, while in Kisenyi, elite capture drove violent eviction. The difference was not law, but collective organisation.

> Digitally organised youth are not merely protesters. They are emerging governance actors

Why Current Systems Fail

Institutional Blindness to Real-World Power: Governance frameworks fail because they prioritise formal institutional enforcement over the informal networks, patronage, and forbearance systems that dictate service delivery, selectively enforce rules, and determine who is protected versus displaced.

Technological Dependency and External Logic: African cities are increasingly governed by the embedded logics of external tech providers, whose surveillance, fintech, and logistics architectures prioritise data extraction and foreign accountability over local sovereignty.

Disconnect from New Political Agency: Traditional systems are unable to engage the leaderless, digitally organised youth movements (such as #EndSARS and Gen-Z protests) that represent the most significant shift toward substantive, non-patronage-based urban accountability in a generation.

Weak Strategic Coordination of Leverage: Despite holding critical minerals essential to the global digital economy, African states fail to coordinate their bargaining power to secure technology transfer, data sovereignty, and equitable industrial partnerships.

Formal System Failure and Non-State Substitution: Formal governance has become a shell in many cities, with non-state providers and community organisations filling critical service gaps; however, these systems remain unsupported and unintegrated, producing fragmented, unequal, and unstable urban outcomes.

Policy Pathways

Policy Pathway 5: Decentralisation with a Performance Index

Operationalise the 2014 African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance, and Local Development by shifting from nominal commitments to measurable fiscal devolution through the creation of a biennial index embedded within the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) in consultation with UCLG Africa's City Environment Enabling Ratings (CEE Ratings) data. This should assess real fiscal autonomy, revenue-generation capacity, and administrative capability at the city level, linking results to peer review, technical support, and penalties for reversal. The objective is to ensure decentralisation translates into enforceable planning authority and resourced urban governance, aligning political incentives with implementation rather than symbolic compliance.

Policy Pathway 6: Decriminalisation of the Informal Economy

Replace colonial-era by-laws that criminalise informal trade and settlements with rights-based frameworks that integrate informal systems into urban governance. This requires graduated licensing regimes, secure tenure arrangements, and participatory planning approaches, alongside institutional mechanisms that embed informal actors into service delivery and market management structures to reduce overlay enforcement approach. This will guide eviction-led governance to integrated urban systems that enhance productivity, stability, and accountability across both formal and informal economies.

Policy Pathway 7: Establish Statutory Youth Governance Councils in African Cities

Institutionalise the accountability demands of digitally mobilised youth movements by establishing independent Youth Governance Councils with statutory roles in city budgeting, planning, and service delivery oversight. These councils should be supported with administrative capacity, access to public financial and planning data, and direct reporting lines to city executives to ensure meaningful participation. The objective is to transform episodic protest into sustained governance engagement, embedding new forms of political agency into urban decision-making, and strengthening transparency and accountability.

Policy Pathway 8: Develop Metropolisation Governance Frameworks for Corridor Cities

Reconfigure urban governance to reflect the emergence of city-regions and corridor economies that transcend administrative boundaries by developing metropolisation frameworks for coordinated planning, infrastructure, and fiscal management. These frameworks should align national, municipal, and regional actors, establish clear accountability mechanisms, and support shared resource governance across urban agglomerations. This reduces fragmentation, enables coherent management of expanding urban systems, and ensures that rapid spatial growth is matched by integrated and accountable governance.

Beyond the Megacity – Why Secondary Cities Will Define Africa's Urban Transition by Hoodo Richter

The future of the planet is urban, 68% of the world's population is projected to live in urban areas by 2050. Asia and Africa are accounting for almost 90% of this increase. In Africa alone, the urban population is expected to double in the period between 2020 and 2050 from 717 million people to 1.4 billion people. By 2050 Africa will be the continent with the second largest urban population behind only Asia, with two of three Africans living in an urban agglomeration.[21]

Africa's urban transition is inevitable, and with proper planning the continent can benefit from a phenomenon that is correlated with transformation. Economist Kingsley Davis drew the correlation between urbanisation and industrialisation.[22] Glaeser argues that cities are vital to development and this is primarily due to people and proximity "ideas spread more easily in denser places."[23]

People and proximity will continue to shape Africa's largest cities which will continue to grow, in 2000 only 34 African cities had a population over a million, as of 2025 there are 106 cities and by 2050, 159 cities on the continent will host more than a million inhabitants, more than tripling.[24]

Yet, a key dynamic of Africa's urban transition which is often overlooked is the role of small, medium-sized, and secondary cities. Between 2000 and 2050, Africa's number of urban agglomerations will almost triple from 3,676 to 10,970, signalling the birth of new cities. While cities with populations over 500,000 are expected to rise from 71 in 2000 to 297 by 2050, 98% of all urban agglomerations will remain below 500,000.[25]

By 2050, almost 98% of Africa's urban areas will still have fewer than 500,000 people

Cities	2000	2025	2050
Total urban agglomerations	3,676	9,379	10,970
Cities below 500,000	3,605	9,186	10,673
Cities above 500,000	71	193	297
% of cities below 500,000	98.1%	97.9%	97.3%

Source: Africapolis (2026)

Cities with a population between 500,000 and one million will more than double between 2000 (37) and 2025 (87) and triple by 2050 (138) cities. The growth is even more pronounced for cities with populations between 100,000 and 500,000, doubling between 2000 (259) and 2025 (701) and quadrupling by 2050 (1029).[26]

National governments in Africa have been prioritising improving infrastructure in their larger cities, mostly in capitals, significantly inhibiting economic growth and exacerbating financing gaps for the smaller and secondary cities. Lagos, the former capital of Nigeria accounts for 35% of the country's GDP[27],

a telling figure of the unequal distribution and concentrated wealth. The UK's capital London, accounts for 22.3%.[28]

African governments must move away diverting funds to metropolitan regions alone; this exposes the national economy to significant risk especially in times of multilayered crises. As countries seek to diversify their economies, they could facilitate this by diversifying their urban hubs.

China case study: 27 cities with over 100 billion in GDP

Indeed, China has benefitted massively by diversifying its urban transition with targeted policies most notably in Shenzhen, a small coastal fishing village in 1980 which is now a tech hub. In 2024, 27 cities in China each had a GDP exceeding 1 trillion Yuan (equivalent to over $130 billion) including Chengdu, Wuhan, Nanjing, and Zhengzhou.[29] While China's four biggest cities, including its capital, Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou make up a combined 12.7% of China's GDP.[30]

Recommendations for levelling the urban playing field:

Inclusive infrastructure: rerouting large-scale projects like road or rail networks and ports could help connect these smaller or secondary cities with economic opportunities.

Decentralisation of Government: empower local governments by devolving certain powers for better service delivery and more up to date sub-national plans. Allow these cities to attract their own foreign direct investment with global stakeholders.

Industrialisation through specialisation: iidentify strengths in promising urban agglomerations, factoring in location, demographics and assets that can be monetised with further investment. Just as Shenzhen was a small fishing town, a small fishing town in Africa has untapped potential.

Working with neighbours: for cities along regional corridors, integrate them into regional economies if that is more suitable and accessible than national ones.

Fiscal autonomy: the goal should be for urban agglomerations to become fiscally autonomous and self-sufficient. For newer cities this means establishing local level tax instruments for revenue generation and for established cities this means strengthening these processes with sub-national knowledge exchange.

DOMAIN 3: Political Economy, Finance, and Collective Action

Fiscal resources required for urban transformation are available on the African continent, but they are being systematically extracted rather than invested. Even then, the most ambitious governance reforms will fail without a structural transformation of the political economy of urban finance. African cities cannot build inclusive infrastructure, sustain community governance institutions, or attract the investment needed for urban transitions if the economic systems within which they operate continue to route wealth offshore, subordinate monetary policy to foreign decisions, and price raw materials rather than manufacturing or services. The political economy of urban finance is a central determinant of whether any governance reform can be resourced and sustained.

The Critical Minerals Opportunity

Urban infrastructure remains underfunded not because resources are lacking, but because value is extracted externally and not reinvested domestically. Without capturing and directing this economic value, cities lack the fiscal capacity to finance the infrastructure needed for inclusive and sustainable urban growth.[31] Africa holds approximately one-third of the world's known reserves of cobalt, lithium, manganese, graphite, and rare earth elements: the core inputs of the global energy transition. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) alone accounts for over 70% of global cobalt output; South Africa produces most of the world's platinum group metals; Guinea produces over 123 million tons of bauxite annually; and Zimbabwe produces 97% of Africa's 6.97% share of lithium production in the global market.[32]

Africa has the minerals. The challenge is keeping the value

Given infrastructure and processing challenges however, Chinese companies have become dominant - particularly in the lithium sector with 10 of the 11lithium exploration and mining projects in Zimbabwe now under Chinese ownership.[33] Despite China's investment, Africa remains a raw material exporter, generating minimal domestic economic value relative to its resource endowment. Zimbabwe can replicate Botswana's success by processing lithium locally rather than exporting it raw, allowing the country to capture more value, create jobs, and generate revenue for economic development. Achieving this requires strong governance, reliable infrastructure, and policies that ensure local participation while attracting diverse and accountable investment.[34] Botswana's Debswana joint venture[35] and the Zambia-DRC joint Battery and Electric Vehicle (BEV) initiative19 demonstrate that domestically governed mineral value chains are achievable.

Technology Leverage and the Geopolitics of Data

Africa's critical mineral position gives governments genuine geopolitical leverage with digital technology providers.[36] Cobalt for batteries, lithium for electric vehicles (EVs), and rare earth elements for electronics: the bargaining power is tangible, but realising it requires coordination, regulatory capacity, and the willingness to use export restrictions (as Zimbabwe and Namibia have done for lithium and graphite) as deliberate policy tools. There is thus a need to advocate for a transition from dependency toward transactional relationships: using mineral resources to negotiate technology transfer, data centres and sovereignty, and genuine industrial partnerships.[37]

Fiscal resources required for urban transformation are available on the African continent, but they are being systematically extracted rather than invested

Urban Finance and the Formalisation of People's Economy

Digital financial infrastructure is creating new possibilities for city finance and citizen engagement in Lagos, Nairobi, Kigali, and Niamey. M-Pesa, Paga, Flutterwave, Orange Money, Irembo, and e-citizen platforms are generating financial inclusion where banking systems have failed. Savings and Credit Cooperatives (SACCOs) and tontines, traditional solidarity savings systems, serve as the cultural and institutional foundation upon which more sophisticated urban finance mechanisms can be built.[38] Interoperability across the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) borders is identified as the critical enabling condition for transforming fragmented national fintech ecosystems into a continental urban finance architecture.

Colonial Financial Architecture

France's CFA Franc Zone historically excluded African governments from major monetary policy decisions, requiring fixed parity to the Euro. This remains a living constraint on the fiscal capacity of some of Africa's most urbanising nations.[39] Such dependencies illustrate that the investment capacity of urban governments can be halved overnight by a decision made outside of the sites of development. Three strategic responses can be identified: recalibrating financial sovereignty through alternative monetary frameworks; decoupling from historical economic structures; and leveraging diaspora networks and Pan-African solidarity for urban investment.[40] Africa's external public debt has almost doubled in the last ten years from $394.4 billion in 2014 to $690 billion in 2023. This is equivalent to a quarter of the continent's GDP making it the region with the highest debt-to-GDP ratio in the world. In contrast, Asia external public debt stock is the highest in the world, yet it only represents 4.3% of its GDP.[41]

Why Current Systems Fail

Extractive Governance & Policy Failure: Weak regulatory frameworks and inconsistent policies enable the systematic routing of resource wealth offshore, prioritising external profit over domestic beneficiation and leaving urban infrastructure projects critically underfunded.

External Sector Dominance & Value Loss: The concentration of foreign ownership in key industries forces a reliance on raw material exports, which strips domestic governments of the control and fiscal capacity needed to drive local industrial strategy or capture high-value economic gains.

Under-leveraged geopolitical position: Africa's resource advantage is not effectively used to negotiate technology transfer or industrial development.

Digital & Regulatory Fragmentation: A lack of interoperable financial and logistics systems across borders prevents the scaling of local innovations into a unified continental urban finance architecture.

Fragmented financial systems: Lack of coordination across the AfCFTA prevents scaling of digital and informal finance into city-level investment. MSMEs produce the majority of urban economic output but are systematically excluded from urban economic planning, investment frameworks, and formal market access.

Colonial financial legacies: External monetary control (e.g., CFA Franc Zone) constrains fiscal autonomy and urban investment capacity.

A Critical Calculation

The Dar es Salaam Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) cost over $200 million, operated below capacity for years due to incompletion, and failed to serve many low-income commuters.[42] The same investment in participatory urban resilience programmes, MSME zone infrastructure, and decentralised service delivery would have reached far more residents far more effectively. Governance is not only a matter of rights; it is a matter of return on investment.

Policy Pathways

Policy Pathway 9: Establish an African Urban Transition Fund Capitalised Through Critical Mineral Royalties

Create a continent-wide fund, led by the AU, AfDB, and Afreximbank, financed through critical mineral royalties and institutional capital, to directly finance urban infrastructure, MSMEs, and resilience in secondary cities. The fund should give city governments direct access to concessional finance, tied to decentralisation and community participation, and operate free from austerity-linked conditionalities. The fund should operate on terms explicitly excluding conditionalities linked to structural adjustment or austerity.

Policy Pathway 10: Embed Value Addition in Urban Industrial Policy

Through AfCFTA coordination, set binding targets to ensure critical minerals are processed within African cities. Develop urban industrial zones near extraction sites with strong local content, MSME integration, and skills development, using models like Debswana and the Zambia-DRC battery initiative. By retaining more value within domestic economies, this pathway enables mineral wealth to drive industrialisation, job creation, and urban economic diversification, moving African cities from sites of extraction to hubs of production within global value chains.

Policy Pathway 11: Develop MSME Urban Economic Zones

Municipal governments should establish MSME Urban Economic Zones that combine tailored infrastructure with digital formalisation systems to scale the “people’s economy” without displacing it. Through simplified licensing, shared coordination, and access to finance via SACCOs, fintech platforms, and community banks, these zones would lower barriers to entry while enabling gradual integration into formal systems. Digital tools can convert transaction histories into creditworthiness, supporting business growth while expanding the urban tax base, ensuring that formalisation enhances productivity and inclusion rather than undermining existing livelihoods. The Addis Ababa enterprise zone, Lagos’s home-based industry networks, and Nairobi’s digital matatu mapping initiative provide applicable precedents.

Governance is not only a matter of rights; it is a matter of return on investment

Policy Pathway 12: Restore Urban Fiscal Autonomy

African governments should drive structural reform of development finance to restore urban fiscal autonomy and reduce external dependency. This includes expanding local-currency financing to eliminate foreign exchange risk, mobilising African institutional capital such as pension funds for infrastructure investment, and strengthening municipal creditworthiness through targeted technical support. By decentralising financial control and addressing constraints such as those imposed by the CFA Franc Zone, this pathway enables cities to access and manage long-term capital independently, positioning them to finance sustainable and inclusive urban growth.

Governance, Migration, and the Cost of Inaction

Urban governance failure is not a self-contained policy problem. It can shape the conditions under which urban residents build resilience, adapt to risk, or are displaced. These dynamics can also contribute to wider patterns of mobility and migration. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation's Africa on the Move report highlights the scale and geographical diversity of African migration, with 54% of African migrants remaining within the continent, 23% in Europe and 15% in Asia. Migration occurs within cities and peri-urban areas, between cities, and across national and continental borders, often in response to intersecting economic, environmental, political and security pressures. Major migration corridors are between African countries. People move within cities to peri-urban zones. They move between cities, following opportunity or fleeing insecurity. Increasingly, they move across borders and continents, generating migration flows that are reshaping transcontinental political systems. For example, migration from Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire was at 1.8 million people in 2024.

Five Governance Conditions Shaping Resilience, Displacement and Migration

Inadequate sanitation and environmental risk: Floods and infrastructure deficits can destroy settlements and livelihoods, placing pressure on the resilience systems through which communities absorb and adapt to shocks and, where these are overwhelmed, increasing displacement pressures.

Insecure land tenure: Evictions and insecure land tenure undermine household and community investments in homes, businesses and livelihoods, thus weakening the foundations through which residents build resilience and potentially triggering displacement.

State-induced insecurity: Coercive enforcement, violent land acquisition and insecurity undermine community coping systems and make remaining in place increasingly difficult.

Economic exclusion: Where cities fail to create pathways from informality to productive employment and MSME growth remains constrained, residents may respond through mobility, diversification and other adaptive strategies; for some, migration becomes one available response to economic insecurity.

Climate risk compounding: Flooding, extreme heat ,and infrastructure collapse disproportionately affect informal settlements where governance failure is most acute, thus placing additional pressure on already stretched community resilience systems and increasing the risk of displacement.

Diagram 3: How governance failure drives migration. The causal chain from urban governance failure to displacement and its costs for Africa and Europe



Mobility is not synonymous with displacement: urban residents may move strategically to pursue livelihoods and opportunities, while displacement occurs when people are compelled to leave homes, land or livelihoods. Migration can encompass both forms of movement.

Migration is therefore one possible consequence when urban resilience systems are unable to absorb or adapt to cumulative governance, economic, environmental and security pressures. Governance reform is a migration policy. The investment needed for inclusive urban transitions is less than the political cost of sustained displacement.

The migration-governance connection has profound strategic implications as seen in Diagram 3. The political cost to European governments of African migration, including domestic political destabilisation, border enforcement expenditure, and the EU political crisis, now substantially exceeds the cost of the urban governance investments that would reduce migration pressure at its source. Governance reform for urban transitions is therefore simultaneously a development investment, a migration policy, and a geopolitical stabilisation strategy.

Urban governance reform is development policy, migration policy and geopolitical strategy

Cross-Cutting Imperatives

Three imperatives apply across all three domains and must inform every governance and investment decision described in this brief. They are not supplementary concerns; they are structural preconditions for the effectiveness of every policy pathway above.

1. Decolonise Urban Planning Frameworks

Across all chapters of Lwasa and Ndlovu's edited volume Urban Transitions in Africa, one pattern recurs: governance frameworks developed under colonial administration, subsequently reinforced through structural adjustment, international development practice, and donor conditionality, continue to define informal urban life as deviance, treat African urban economies as dysfunctional approximations of Western formal economies, and privilege large-scale networked infrastructure over the distributed, heterogeneous systems that most urban Africans actually depend on.

Analysis of digital colonialism (data extraction architectures embedded in smart city systems; epistemic hierarchies encoded in imported technical standards) and of financial colonialism (the CFA Franc Zone; bilateral trade structures favouring former colonial powers) together make the case that decolonisation is not rhetorical. It is a governance imperative with concrete policy dimensions. Just urban transition requires centring indigenous knowledge, local economic practices, and community-led governance as primary authorities in urban planning, not supplementary inputs to externally designed frameworks.

2. Gender and Intergenerational Equity as Governance Design Principles

Urban women bear disproportionate burdens of informality, service deficits, and governance exclusion, while simultaneously performing the majority of informal care, urban agriculture, and community resilience work documented across this volume's case studies. Informal traders in Harare's markets are predominantly women; urban agricultural producers in Kampala and Nairobi are predominantly women; community health workers managing COVID-19 responses in Lusaka's informal settlements were predominantly women. Yet women are systematically excluded from land tenure, formal economic planning, and political representation in urban governance structures.

Governance reform that does not explicitly address gender equity in economic participation, property rights, and institutional representation will reproduce rather than transform existing inequalities. Similarly, the demographic reality of an urban Africa that is predominantly young, and the demonstrated political agency of digitally organised youth movements, requires governance systems that create genuine participation pathways for youth as governance actors and economic agents, not only as beneficiaries of development programmes.

3. Data Sovereignty and the African Urban Data Commons

Effective urban governance requires data that is usable, used, and useful. Urban Africa is systematically under-researched and under-measured with major data gaps on informal economies, community resilience systems, migration flows, and spatial inequality impede both planning and accountability. Further, the data that is collected about African cities is increasingly harvested by external platform operators rather than governed in the public interest. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation's IIAG has shown strong statistical capacity is a key enabler of good governance, yet the continent has the lowest availability of vital statistics of all world regions particularly in basic building blocks like birth and death registration completeness. In 2023, only ten countries accounting for 19.6% of the continent's population, had birth registration systems that collected at least 90% of births. Population statistics like this are necessary for effective management of urban transition. Africa-based data centres do not only deliver data sovereignty but can drive subscription-based urban economies.

Investing in urban governance costs less than managing the migration pressures its failure creates

Urban resilience cannot be just if women and youth carry the burden but lack economic and political power. It simply reproduces inequality

A just urban transition requires those carrying its burdens to share in its power and opportunities

Summary of Policy Pathways

Domain 1: Urban Resilience Systems

- Policy Pathway 1: Institutionalise Citizen-Led Resilience
- Policy Pathway 2: Mandate Resilience Impact Assessments
- Policy Pathway 3: Formalise Urban Agriculture as Core Infrastructure
- Policy Pathway 4: Build Resilience Capacity in Secondary Cities

Domain 2: Governance and Political Inclusion

- Policy Pathway 5: Decentralisation with a Performance Index
- Policy Pathway 6: Decriminalisation of the Informal Economy
- Policy Pathway 7: Establish Statutory Youth Governance Councils in African Cities
- Policy Pathway 8: Develop Metropolisation Governance Frameworks for Corridor Cities

Domain 3: Political Economy, Finance, and Collective Action

- Policy Pathway 9: Establish an African Urban Transition Fund Capitalised Through Critical Mineral Royalties
- Policy Pathway 10: Embed Value Addition in Urban Industrial Policy
- Policy Pathway 11: Develop MSME Urban Economic Zones
- Policy Pathway 12: Restore Urban Fiscal Autonomy

Policy Pathway Roles and Responsibilities

Actor	Primary Responsibilities	Pathways
African Union & AUDA-NEPAD	Develop urban agriculture policy framework; operationalise Charter on Decentralisation; coordinate AfCFTA mineral value addition targets; govern African Urban Transition Fund; support metropolisation governance pilots	3, 5, 8, 9, 10
AfDB & Afreximbank	Capitalise African Urban Transition Fund; develop local currency urban financing instruments; expand direct city government financing; build municipal creditworthiness facilities	9, 12
AfCFTA Secretariat	Set binding domestic value addition targets for minerals; develop interoperability standards; coordinate MSME Urban Economic Zone frameworks across member states	10, 11
National Governments	Repeal colonial criminalisation by-laws; establish Youth Governance Councils; develop metropolisation governance frameworks; implement decentralisation reform; set value addition targets	5, 6, 7, 8, 10
City Governments	Establish participatory resilience planning mechanisms; create MSME Urban Economic Zones; implement participatory budgeting; partner with community organisations on formalisation	1, 4, 6, 11
Development Partners	Mandate resilience impact assessments; shift financing direct to city governments; fund African Urban Data Commons; support secondary city resilience governance	2, 4, 12
Civil Society, Youth & Community Orgs	Participate in governance councils; monitor decentralisation performance; document and scale community resilience practices; build Urban Data Commons datasets	1, 5, 7

Conclusion: The Urgency of Now

Africa's urban transition is already under way with cities expanding, economies shifting, and governance systems being tested from within and without as citizens – especially young people – demand greater accountability.

The urgency lies in the widening gap between the scale of urbanisation and the capacity of governance systems to respond. This gap is driven by structural constraints: colonial and post-colonial economic dependencies, weak fiscal devolution, the criminalisation of informality, and growing external control over digital infrastructure and critical resources.

The foundations for transformation are already present. Community resilience systems sustain millions through crises. Youth movements are redefining accountability. Fintech ecosystems are expanding financial inclusion. MSME networks are generating livelihoods where formal economies fall short. Continental frameworks such as the AfCFTA and the Africa Mining Vision (AMV) provide the basis for aligning Africa's natural wealth and demographic dynamism with long-term urban development.

The challenge is no longer whether Africa can finance and govern its urban transition, but whether it can align its institutions with the systems that already sustain it. If this alignment is achieved, African cities will not only manage urbanisation but will also define the terms of global urban transformation in the 21st century.



The foundations for transformation already exist. The institutional task is to recognise, resource and scale them.

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