

**MYTH 2 (semi-myth): “Africa’s urban population is growing out of control without economic development.”**

Africa is often singled out as an example of a region where particularly rapid urban growth is taking place without economic growth. Certainly, Africa has some of the world’s fastest growing cities over the last fifty years and many African nations have had very little economic growth in recent decades. But one of the main reasons why urban change has been so rapid in recent decades is that it began from such a small base, as the European colonial powers who controlled virtually all of Africa 50 years ago had kept down urban populations by imposing restrictions on the rights of their national populations to live and work in urban centres. The removal or weakening of the colonial apartheid-like controls on population movements was one of the reasons why urban populations grew so rapidly just before or after the ending of colonial rule.<sup>12</sup> For instance, urban growth dynamics over the last 40 years in South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) cannot be understood without taking into account the profound impact of controls on people’s movement imposed by white minority regimes on the composition and growth of cities.<sup>13</sup> In South Africa, with the lifting of long-applied restrictions on African urbanisation in 1986 and then the ending of the apartheid government, the country became an increasingly popular destination for refugees and migrants from other African nations, which had a profound impact on urban development.<sup>14</sup> In some countries, a considerable part of the migrant flows to cities in the transition between colonial rule and independence or after independence was women and children joining their husbands/partners who were living and working in urban areas – because this had not been permitted under colonial rule.<sup>15</sup>

Another reason for rapid urban population growth was the achievement of political independence. Newly independent governments had to build the institutions of governance that nation-states need and also to expand the higher education system that had been so undeveloped under colonial rule. This obviously boosted growth in the urban centres that were the main political and administrative centres. Many commentators view the rapid growth of sub-Saharan African cities over the last 50 years as a serious problem. But if a large part of this rapid change is related to political independence and the removal of highly discriminatory controls on the right of the population to move freely, it also has positive aspects.

The World Bank and various other commentators have suggested that sub-Saharan Africa is unusual because it has been urbanising rapidly without economic growth.<sup>16</sup> But for many nations in this region, the lack of any recent census or any other accurate information on the size of their urban populations makes it impossible to make such a claim. Many sub-Saharan African nations have had no census for 10-20 years. Most of the association between rapid urbanization and stagnant economies is likely to be the result of inaccurate statistics. With no census data available, levels of urbanization for 2000 are estimated by assuming that rates of change in levels of urbanization from the 1970s or 1980s continued during the 1990s. But the economic and political underpinnings of rapid urbanization in the 1970s were probably not present or much

---

<sup>12</sup> Potts, Deborah (1995), "Shall we go home? Increasing urban poverty in African cities and migration processes", *The Geographic Journal*, Vol.161, Part 3, November, pp. 245-264.

<sup>13</sup> Potts 1995, op cit; Crankshaw, Owen and Susan Parnell (2002), *Urban Change in South Africa*, Urban Change Working Paper 4, IIED, London.

<sup>14</sup> Crankshaw and Parnell 2002, op cit

<sup>15</sup> Bryceon, Deborah (1983), *Urbanisation and Agrarian Development in Tanzania with special reference to Secondary Cities*, IIED, London.

<sup>16</sup> See Box 6.4, page 130 of World Bank (1999), *Entering the 21st Century: World Development Report 1999/2000*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 300 pages.

weaker during the 1990s. There are also indications that rates of increase in levels of urbanization have slowed down in much of sub-Saharan Africa and that, contrary to the World Bank's belief, the nations that have urbanised most are generally those with the best economic performance.<sup>17</sup> Sub-Saharan Africa also has very few of the world's largest cities.

Sub-Saharan Africa does have examples of cities growing rapidly without economic growth, because they become the destination of large numbers of people fleeing wars or civil unrest. For instance, millions of people fled to urban areas in Angola, Mozambique and the Sudan during civil wars during the 1980s and 1990s, just as they had done in Zimbabwe during the liberation struggle of the 1970s. Many African cities in nations without civil conflict have their populations boosted by immigrants fleeing civil strife. When peace is established, the links between economic change and urban change return. For instance, in both Mozambique and Zimbabwe, there was significant out-migration from some cities when conflict ended.<sup>18</sup> If the peace holds in Angola, many Angolans living in different cities around Africa will return; many may also return to their farms. If peace and economic stability is established in DR Congo (formerly Zaire), many cities or refugee camps in neighbouring countries will lose population.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> See Potts, Deborah (2001), *Urban Growth and Urban Economies in Eastern and Southern Africa: an Overview*, Paper presented at a workshop on African Urban Economies: Viability, Vitality of Vitiation of Major Cities in East and Southern Africa, Netherlands, 9-11 November, 19 pages plus annex to be published in D. Bryceson and D. Potts (eds), *African Urban Economies: Viability, Vitality or Vitiation of Major Cities in East and Southern Africa*; also Potts 1995, op cit.

<sup>18</sup> Potts 2001, op. cit

<sup>19</sup> Mann, Gillian (2002), "'Wakimbizi, wakimbizi': Congolese refugee boys' and girls' perspectives on life in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania", *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 14, No. 2.