

# Foreword

Urbanisation is one of the most profound transformations that the African continent will undergo in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since 1990, the number of cities in Africa has doubled — from 3 300 to 7 600 — and their cumulative population has increased by 500 million people. Africa’s cities are the most rapidly growing cities in the world; they are the youngest and they are changing fast. Their impact on Africa’s economic, social and political landscape in the coming decades is likely to be profound. Urbanisation, therefore, presents immense opportunities to accelerate progress towards the 2030 and 2063 development agendas and for promoting continental integration in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). For African policy makers, it also entails very important challenges in planning, managing and financing urban growth, both at the local and the national levels. In many places in Africa and beyond, there is a prevailing negative perception of the externalities of urbanisation and its impact on development. This has slowed policy processes to make urbanisation a central part of Africa’s development strategies.

This report presents compelling evidence — from 2 600 cities across 34 countries — that urbanisation in Africa contributes to better economic outcomes and higher standards of living. It shows that in most socio-economic dimensions, Africa’s cities significantly outperform the countries in which they are located, and that the gap between the performance of African cities and the national averages is larger than in many other parts of the world. One of the most underappreciated achievements of African cities over the last 30 years has been that, despite growing by 500 million people, they have maintained their economic performance, providing several hundred million people with better jobs and improved access to services and infrastructure. Positive spillovers from urbanisation are also spreading to rural areas, which benefit from proximity to cities.

Nevertheless, economic and political constraints continue to limit cities’ potential to contribute to economic growth and social development. Too many people have been left behind. The need for new approaches tailored to local dynamics is urgent, and the challenges ahead are very important. This report underlines the importance of investing in better planning in large urban centres. Mean-

while, it shows the potential of enlisting small and mid-sized cities as a means of accelerating job creation, productivity and service delivery, and of developing connectivity and clusters of cities to promote economic integration. It also argues for the crucial importance of co-ordinated policies and the need to anchor the role of cities in national development planning. Finally, local governments need greater fiscal and administrative capacity so they can play a more active role in economic development.

Current United Nations projections indicate that Africa’s cities will grow by an additional 900 million inhabitants between now and 2050, welcoming two-thirds of Africa’s population. This urban expansion not only demands a need to plan, manage and finance infrastructure and public services, it will require strategies that promote employment, stimulate green technology uptake and digitalisation, improve competitiveness and ensure climate neutrality and sustainability. National development agendas need to acknowledge the important role of cities in promoting economic development, boosting resilience and addressing climate change and future sustainability challenges. Coherent policies are called for to ensure that national strategies are effective at the local level.

However, confronting the challenges of Africa’s urban growth also inherently entails opportunities to envision an urban future that may not follow the same path as the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the rest of the world. Cities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be different from the cities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. African cities, and in particular its small and mid-sized cities, are significantly less entrenched in carbon-intensive models of development than cities in many other regions. Meanwhile, significant investments in urban infrastructure have yet to be made, and the population of African cities is mainly young. These are important foundations on which to build new models that are more climate neutral, more inclusive and more liveable.

While this report presents one of the most comprehensive data analysis on African cities’ economic performance to date, it also highlights the need for more evidence and analysis to support policy making. New challenges, such as recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and new scales of economic and political organisation — including the African Continental Free Trade Area

(AfCFTA), urban governance and regional development — will increasingly demand deeper understanding of local contexts. Better data and evidence is an important basis for making policy processes more forward-looking,

transparent and inclusive. Shaping the future of African cities and thus of its people, territories and countries depends on the contribution of all stakeholders at all levels.

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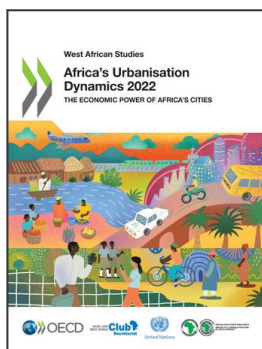
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