

Urbanisation is a tool for development

Growing urbanisation could be a big opportunity for Africa, according to the United Nations' Africa Renewal Programme.



Dr Joan Clos

*Dr Joan Clos is the executive director of the Nairobi-based United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). In this interview with **Newton Kanhema** for [Africa Renewal](#)*, Dr Clos talks about the effects of urbanisation in Africa and the forthcoming Habitat III, a major UN conference on housing and sustainable urban development to be held in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016.*

Q: What are the consequences of Africa's fast-growing urbanisation, and should Africa control this phenomenon?

The share of the population living in African urban areas now is about 30%, but will rise to 50% in a very short period of time. That will present several challenges in both governance and the capacity of cities or even national government to react. It's important to have a national urban policy which can be transformed into local initiatives. Urbanisation is more of an opportunity than a challenge because it goes in parallel with development. If governments plan and design urbanisation well, they will enjoy the benefits that urbanisation brings to a society. Urbanisation will be a big opportunity for Africa in the coming years.

Q: So what you are saying is that urbanisation can bring benefits?

Yes. In the way and pace that African societies are going, urbanisation is a consequence of development and also the driving force for accelerating this development.

Q: Many African governments tend to develop new megacities in order to decongest existing cities. Is this sustainable or a fire brigade solution?

Megacities tend not to be sustainable but they are good evolutions for economic prosperity if they are well planned. In fact, there are many big cities around the world that are much bigger than the megacities of Africa. Tokyo, for example, has more than 35 million people, compared to some of Africa's megacities that have around 10 to 12 million people. The question is not the size but the capacity of the cities to develop, not spontaneously but in a well-designed and well-planned manner. The problem is not the emergence of megacities, but the lack of planning. The challenge is how to transform

megacities so they can be productive without accumulating the problems of unplanned urbanisation.

Q: What kind of support does UN-Habitat provide to national governments to develop environmentally sustainable human settlements?

We provide advice to member states on strategies that can be applied to urbanisation to increase efficiency and productivity. This includes suggesting a national urban policy composed of three pillars. The first pillar is rules and regulations; this is important because urbanisation is about the rule of law. The second pillar is about the quality of urban design, and the third is financial planning. Urbanisation is a costly exercise which requires a lot of resources.

Q: New cities are springing up in Africa but so too are slums. What kind of policies should African governments adopt to address the proliferation of slums?

Slums are a natural consequence of spontaneous urbanisation. In that sense they should be considered a temporary outcome of development. In order to prevent the slums, we need to accelerate development. Slums should be integrated in a much better manner with proper rights to housing. You cannot fight slums in an isolated manner. What you need is an integrated policy that addresses the livelihoods of people, such as employment, income, training and human capital. Authorities need to provide affordable houses for the middle class. It's a long and difficult process; there's no radical solution.

Q: Are there best practices in the world that African countries can adopt? What can we learn from Kigali or Lagos?

Well, there is a lot of experience in and outside the region. There are no easy and quick solutions to urbanisation because it is a process of transforming a society and it requires time. What is important is to approach the question with a good strategy and a midterm and long-term vision. And this is what we provide—a framework of ideas that address different problems that cities face. We are helping Kigali to introduce new concepts for city extension, well-planned urbanisation, quality public spaces and a balance between public spaces and buildable plots. In Lagos we have a very interesting case of a big city that, although it's mentioned as one of the mega-capitals of Africa, has the capacity to initiate policies that can generate income, sustain domestic services and transform the wealth of its habitants. Lagos is a good example of the approach other African cities should adopt.

Q: The major event on your calendar this year is Habitat III. How significant is this event for the African continent?

This is a very important meeting taking place in Quito, Ecuador, 20 years after Habitat II, which took place in Istanbul, Turkey. Habitat III will be a review of urbanisation over the past two decades. It will also be the beginning of a process to implement agreed strategies on urbanization for the next 20 years. There is no doubt that urbanisation is going to accelerate over the coming years and Africa will experience the most rapid pace in the world. I am happy that African leaders are mobilising their governments for Habitat III, as they will be actively participating, engaging and deepening the debate on urbanisation over the coming years.

Q: What outcome can African leaders expect from Habitat III?

Habitat III would provide an important opportunity for African leaders to share experiences on transforming urbanization as a tool for development. Very often we approach urbanisation as a problem of poverty, lack of services, etc., and not as an opportunity to accelerate the pace of development. Habitat III will align urbanisation as a development tool with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Q: Many African countries face huge urbanisation problems. Without resources, how can such countries implement policies that provide for adequate human settlement?

The issue of financing urbanisation is a very complex one but economists say the wealth that urbanisation generates is much more than the cost of urbanising. The question is how to share the wealth created by urbanisation among all stakeholders. One of the tricky points that need to be addressed is that urbanisation is not just building buildings, but finding a balance between the art and science of building cities and building buildings.

Q: Are there elements of the recently signed Paris agreement on climate change that illuminate the work that you do?

Yes, climate change is important to urbanisation. This is particularly so in the developed world, where cities are a source of greenhouse gas emissions. Yet the effects of climate change are most felt in the cities that do not have sufficient infrastructure. It's a complex equation that needs to be addressed globally. It means taking measures to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases and helping cities that suffer from the consequences to adapt to new conditions. In some parts of the world cities are the main emitters of greenhouse gases and in others cities suffer the worst from climate change.

Q: Lastly, what is your message for Africa?

Africa has a huge opportunity to address the new challenges of urbanisation. It's a wave and it's a process. They should devise strategies that focus on the capacity of urbanisation to generate prosperity. The big question is how to direct this process, and with which objective and vision. I urge people in Africa and their governments to take urbanisation as an opportunity and as a tool for development.

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