

Chapter 12

Urbanization in Ghana: Insights and Implications for Urban Governance

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ABSTRACT

Urbanization, in theory, should result in human advancement by stimulating socio-economic development. However, recent studies indicate that African urbanization tends to compound urban poverty, stall socio-economic development, and disrupt urban functionality. Unfortunately, African urbanization is expected to intensify in the foreseeable future with the continent expected to become home to about 1.3 billion of the global urban population by 2050. This current and expected increase in African urbanization has implications for urban governance, and how this phenomenon is managed will largely determine the future of urban Africa. This chapter examines the contours of African urbanization using Ghana as a case study. An analysis of past and recent urbanization patterns and causes in Ghana is presented. The chapter further explores urban governance implications associated with Ghana's urbanization and suggests policy reforms which may help address the growing depressing implications of urbanization in Ghana and Africa at large.

INTRODUCTION

The veracity of urbanization has become widespread in developing regions particularly Africa, with increasing global acknowledgement of its implications on sustainable urban management and environmental conservation (Cobbinah, Erdiaw-Kwasie & Amoateng, 2015a, 2015b; United Nations Human Settlement Program [UNHABITAT], 2012). The meaning of urbanization has increasingly been described by Cobbinah et al. (2015a) as a demographic, ecological, sociological and economic occurrence that congregates people in urban areas and has the would-be to either fuel or impede development of these areas – towns, cities, metropolises, mega cities, megalopolises – in both developed and developing countries.

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Presently, about 54% of the world's population is urban, with such trend expected to continue to nearly 70% by 2050 with increasing concentration in urban Africa and Asia (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division [UNDESA/PD], 2012; UNHABITAT, 2009). In the context of global urbanization discourse, it is worth bearing in mind that African urbanization is a phenomenon whose negative dimensions are widespread and increasingly pervasive, overshadowing the positive aspects (Cobbinah et al., 2015b). For example, Africa is expected to become a home to nearly quarter (1.3 billion) of the world's urban population by 2050, with the growth in urban population characterized by debilitating socio-economic and environmental consequences (UNDESA/PD, 2012). In such a situation, the future of urban Africa appears gloomy, as projections indicate that between 2020 and 2050, the continent will be the fastest urbanizing region in the world with urbanization rates of between 35 and 60% (UNHABITAT, 2009, 2012). Attempting to provide an understanding of current and future contours of African urbanization has invariably proven difficult and uncertain, leaving many researchers and international organizations to describe the continent's urbanization as distinctive and threatening (e.g., Songsore, 2009).

Traditionally, the process of urbanization has been characterized by socio-economic development often driven by radical transformations in agricultural productivity and industrialization (Cobbinah et al., 2015a). True, some developing countries such as China have undoubtedly demonstrated a much better ability towards realizing the benefits of urbanization through improved economic development (Cohen, 2006). This socio-economic development aspect of urbanization is as yet only dimly appreciated in Africa. African urbanization is occurring without such important socio-economic transformation necessary for improving living conditions and protecting the environment (Cobbinah et al., 2015b). This urban evolution trajectory in Africa appears to be a valid paradigm of Ghana's urbanization, due to limited transformation of the production structure through industrialization and agricultural modernization.

Previous literature on Ghana in the 1980s predicted over 50% of urban population by 2020 and emphasized the need for more robust policy strategies to cope with associated ramifications (Nabila, 1988). Today, official statistics indicate that, out of 24,658,823 population of Ghana, about 50.9% is urban, with the country set to become increasingly urbanized (Ghana Statistical Service [GSS], 2012). Current level of urbanization in Ghana is phenomenal considering relatively low levels of past trends: 9.4% in 1931, 13.9% in 1948, 23% in 1960, 28.9% in 1970, 31.3% in 1984 and 43.9 in 2000 (GSS, 2012; Songsore, 2009). However, such sharply increasing trends since the turn of the 21st century have adverse ramifications for the management of both natural and the built environments as well as socio-economic wellbeing of urban residents.

Complicating matters further is the dynamics of Ghanaian urbanization, characterized by regional disparities. According to Osei-Bonsu (2012) rapid urbanization which has become a common place in Ghana has skewed development efforts towards urban areas resulting in slowdown in population growth in many rural areas due to out-migration and overconcentration in the big cities of Accra (national capital), Kumasi (second largest city) and Sekondi-Takoradi (third largest city). The rapid concentration of rural population in Ghanaian cities is recognized as the beginning of a slow but gradual process of marked disparities in development between the northern and southern parts of Ghana, and between urban and rural areas (Osei-Bonsu, 2012). Unfortunately, there is limited assessment of these issues, in terms of prevailing urbanization trends and dynamics as well as current and future ramifications on urban governance in Ghana. Such analysis is necessary to help manage urbanization sustainably in Ghana, and other African countries and to further provide an urban management trajectory that may ensure the realization of the benefits associated with urbanization.

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