



# THE STATE OF AFRICAN CITIES 2008

A framework for addressing  
urban challenges in Africa



UN  HABITAT

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**Cover photo: Satellite image of Maputo, Mozambique. ©Space Imaging**

**This image shows the spatial layout differences of a “fragmented city”, consisting of a low density formal city with regular street patterns, public open spaces and public green, that clearly contrasts with the dense, unplanned and *ad hoc* developments within the informal parts of the city.**

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# Foreword by UN-HABITAT



It gives me great pleasure to introduce the first State of the African Cities Report, a cooperative effort between UN-HABITAT and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

This is the first issue in an evolving series of state of the African cities reports, intended to provide both a tool and a platform for debate on urban issues within Africa. It aims to provide focus and encouragement to African governments at the central and local level as well as to other key actors in the broad area of sustainable human settlements development. We hope to promote new thinking about sustainable urbanization by drawing attention to critical housing, urban development and governance issues in this new age of globalization.

Contrary to common perception, most urban growth in Africa now takes place in secondary and tertiary settlements, the towns with less than 500,000 inhabitants, rather than in its largest cities. Consequently, the smaller African cities will need the close attention of policy-makers if their growth is to be pragmatically guided taking into account challenges imposed by environmental changes resulting from population pressure and climate change.

Meanwhile, the larger African cities will continue to grow as well and the mega-city has now also emerged in Africa. More and more African cities will soon join ranks with the world's largest cities. In addition, there are now indications of the emergence in Africa of very large 'city regions' and urban development corridors as a result of spatial and economic synergies between cities in relative proximity. Increasingly, urbanization is moving from city-based to region-based configurations, which poses a host of entirely new challenges over and above the already complex issues of Africa's current urban transition. This is an even more noteworthy phenomenon given that the bulk of Africa's urban transition, though yet to come, is only a generation away. By 2030 the majority of Africans will be urban residents, and the majority

of them are predicted to live in slums and informal settlements unless radical corrective measures are taken.

Over the past 15 years, democracy and economic change have transformed many African nations. The region's commitment to good governance can be seen in the establishment of NEPAD and its governance counterpart – the African Peer Review Mechanism. Continental economic growth has exceeded 5 percent for several years – a positive change over the dismal economic performance of the 1980s and 1990s. The number of conflicts in the region has declined by two-thirds since the late 1990s and African nations themselves now build and maintain peace within the continent.

Africa's burgeoning urban problems have received less attention than warranted and now, at the dawn of Africa's urban age, these need to be urgently addressed. The challenges clearly put a premium on vision and leadership for addressing such issues as deep urban poverty, the need for closing the affordable housing gap, safe drinking water, sanitation, transportation and livelihoods for swelling urban populations, regardless of whether they live in Africa's mega-cities or smaller settlements.

Finally, I like to commend the good spirit of inter-agency cooperation in a true One UN manner for the preparation of this publication. I thank all our partners for their vision, contributions and cooperation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anna K. Tibaijuka'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a white background.

**Anna K. Tibaijuka**  
**Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director**  
**United Nations Human Settlements Programme**  
**(UN-HABITAT)**

# Foreword by UNECA



The sustainability of the continental environment and human life requires, amongst other things, that human settlements in both urban and rural areas are made economically buoyant, socially vibrant and environmentally sound with full respect for cultural, religious and natural heritage and diversity. Urban settlements hold a promise for human development and for the protection of the region's natural resources through their ability to support large numbers of people, especially when negative impacts on the natural environment can be limited. However, many cities in Africa are witnessing harmful patterns of growth, of land use and of degradation of their physical structures. Such problems are often accompanied by soil, air, water and waste pollution and destruction of resources. Many cities are also subject to limited water supply, sanitation and drainage and dependent on toxic and non-renewable energy sources. Many of these trends are aggravated or accelerated by high population growth and rural-to-urban migration.

Many African countries' improved economic performance is being threatened by a global economic crisis and can be exacerbated by high population growth rates and environmental degradation. Previous economic crises, including the debt burden and the collapse of import-substitution industries, increased the number of Africans living in absolute poverty and without access to adequate shelter. Indeed, the increasing incidence of squalid shelter conditions and homelessness is cause for concern in many African countries and threatens health standards, security and even life itself. It is estimated that 46 percent of the African urban population lives in slums and informal settlements where poverty, overcrowding, unemployment, crime and pollution are prevalent. African cities must therefore be reoriented to provide environments where people can live and work in social harmony and can overcome negative urban features.

Poverty reduction and the creation of economic opportunity is a key goal for Africa. However, tackling poverty requires not only significant increases in GDP per capita, but also requires reduction of inequality and investing in social development to enhance the capabilities of those living in poverty and other vulnerable groups. Additional action is needed to overcome disparities in the opportunities available to different sections of society, such as those between men and women living in urban agglomerations. These disparities start during childhood when girls have limited access to education and the resulting gender-related inequalities adversely affect human development at individual, family and community levels.

With the present prevailing conditions in the cities and towns of Africa, the magnitude of the problems and the sheer size of the challenges, Governments should gear up to implement strategies for the sustainable facilitation of adequate shelter for rapidly growing urban populations and for the urban poor through enabling approaches to shelter development and other improvements that are environmentally sound.

As in the past, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) is extremely pleased to have worked successfully with UN-HABITAT on the State of the African Cities Report 2008. It is an excellent initiative and a good example of our commitment to working with various partners to enhance our collective support to, and impact on Africa's political, economic and social development.



**Abdoulaye Janneh**  
**Under-Secretary-General**  
**Executive Director Economic Commission for Africa**

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The Report was written under the direction of Alioune Badiane, Director of the Regional Office for Africa and the Arab States (ROAAS) of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT). The coordination of the report was undertaken by Jos Maseland, assisted by Lusungu Kayani, both of the UN-HABITAT Regional Office for African and the Arab States.

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“... I left [the city] as early as the fourth month of my pregnancy and went back to live with my mother and son in the village. That was when I realized that the city had gotten under my skin. Each passing day, awaiting the arrival of my second child, was like a year to me, because I was no longer able to identify with and integrate back into village life. I had sampled city life.”



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