**Urban Africa**

The African continent is vast and diverse, but one constant holds true across it: a rapid migration from rural areas to expanding cities.

*Cover: Densely packed skyscrapers make for a very geometric landscape in Nairobi, Kenya | [Ninara](https://www.flickr.com/photos/ninara/17297660486/" \t "_blank)*

**For many, the mention of Africa conjures images of grassy plains, thick jungles, or charismatic megafauna.**

To be certain, these natural spectacles are a staple of the tourism industry for most African countries.

*Wildebeest cross the Serengeti |*[*Jorge Tung*](https://unsplash.com/@jorgetung)

Increasingly, though, they don't represent the day-to-day realities of people living on the continent. For the locals, city life is rapidly becoming—or already is—the norm.

*Mount Kilimanjaro rises above Amboseli National Park |*[*Sergey Pesterev*](https://unsplash.com/@sickle)

**In 1960 less than 20 percent of Africa's population lived in cities.**

Today, that number has doubled to roughly 40 percent.

*The convention center in Kigali, Rwanda, illuminated at night | [Raddison](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kigali_Convention_Centre.jpg" \t "_blank)*

Urban centers, meanwhile, are projected to house [nearly 60 percent](https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Tracking_Africa%E2%80%99s_Progress_in_Figures.pdf) of the population by 2050. By the numbers alone, it's clear that the rate of urbanization in Africa is truly taking off.

*Cape Town, South Africa, is home to nearly 4 million people | [Pixabay](https://pixabay.com/photos/cape-town-south-africa-mountain-102825/" \t "_blank)*

**The global rise of cities**

Urbanization has been a phenomenon seen round the world. Within the past decade, the world crossed a historic threshold, with more than half of the planet's human population living in cities.

*People flock the streets of Kinshasa, DRC |*[*MONUSCO*](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Liesse_populaire_dans_les_rues_de_Kinshasa_hier_soir_%C3%A0_la_suite_de_la_qualification_de_l%E2%80%99%C3%A9quipe_nationale_de_la_RD_Congo.jpg)

But the timing and pattern of the migration to urban centers has varied dramatically: Europe and North America have been largely urban since the 1950s, while urbanization took off in Latin America and Asia a few decades later. Now, Africa is undergoing an urban shift of its own.

Let's take a closer look at urbanization across the continent to better understand this trend.

*Graphic: Percent of each continent's population living in urban centers |*[*Population Reference Bureau*](https://www.prb.org/international/indicator/urban/table/?geos=AFRICA,ASIA,CENTRAL%20AMERICA,NORTHERN%20AMERICA,EUROPE,LATIN%20AMERICA%20AND%20THE%20CARIBBEAN,SOUTH%20AMERICA)

**African urbanization, country by country**

**Population by the numbers**

This map shows each African country's **total population in 2015**—represented by circle size—compared to **the percentage of the population that lived in urban areas that year**—represented by color.

[*Africapolis*](http://africapolis.org/home)

With a population of more than 188 million, **Nigeria was Africa's most populous nation in 2015.**

*The Nile River cuts through downtown Cairo, Egypt | [Sherif Moharram](https://unsplash.com/@shmoham" \t "_blank)*

However, less than 53 percent of the Nigerian population lived in urban areas. By comparison, as much as **93 percent of Egypt's population was urbanized by 2015**, making it the most urban country on the continent.

**15 years of growth...**

Looking back more than a decade, it's clear that urban populations across Africa have generally been on the rise. This map visualizes that growth, **comparing each country's urban population size in 2000 to its size in 2015.**

[*Africapolis*](http://africapolis.org/home)

While Nigeria and Egypt stand out here for their sheer size, explore the map in greater detail and you'll find some interesting pieces of information. Compare, for instance, Nigeria with Ethiopia.

*A celebratory scene in Ethiopia's Addis Ababa |*[*Yonatan Tesfaye*](https://unsplash.com/@ytetbyflex)

Ethiopia's urban population grew by nearly 18 million people over 15 years; that's a fraction of the 50-million-person increase Nigeria experienced during the same time. But, factoring in each country's starting point, **Ethiopia's urban population nearly tripled,** while Nigeria's essentially doubled.

As this example demonstrates, having a sense of the amount of urban population growth is a good place to start, but there is more to this story than just sheer size.

**...15 years of change**

In the previous map, more populous countries distracts a bit from urbanization's impact on smaller countries—which often see more drastic *rates* of change than their larger counterparts. This map, therefore, tells us **which countries are shifting from rural to urban living the quickest.**

[*Africapolis*](http://africapolis.org/home)

Through this lens, a new set of countries—including Angola, Kenya, and Rwanda—initially draw the eye. The proportion of Rwanda's population living in cities, for example, grew by 30 percentage points over 15 years.

Now that we've considered these trends at the country level, let's see how they play out on a more granular level.

**Exploring urbanization at the city level**

**Population density, mapped**

Here we can see where on the continent people are the most concentrated.

[*SEDAC*](https://sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/data/set/gpw-v4-population-density-rev10/data-download)*, [Africapolis](http://africapolis.org/data" \t "_blank)*

One of the first things to stand out is the close proximity to water—like the Nile river or Lake Victoria—for many of the most densely populated areas.

*One of Kampala, Uganda's many markets |*[*Kevin James*](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kampala_Market.jpg)

Regional hubs like Nigeria and Ethiopia are also interesting to examine, revealing the outward creep of a growing population fueled by greater economic opportunity.

**Urban centers, mapped**

Unsurprisingly, the population density patterns largely translate into a map of cities across the continent.

[*Africapolis*](http://africapolis.org/home)

Africa is home to some of the world’s largest megacities: As of 2015, it had **11 urban areas with more than 5 million inhabitants each.**

Among these urban centers are some of the oldest human settlements on the continent.

**Cairo is Africa’s largest urban agglomeration with a population of nearly 23 million.** Several former colonial centers, like Lagos, Nigeria (which bears a Portuguese name), also boast mega-sized populations.

*A view of Lagos from off the coast |*[*Anders Broberg*](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lagos_(Nigeria).jpg)

Generally speaking, all of these megacities are located in areas that are, or once were, economically strategic.

**Agglomerations and rates of change, revisited**

As was hinted at in our country-level maps above, megacities are not necessarily the fastest-growing urban areas in Africa, and rural exodus is not necessarily the primary driver of urbanization across the continent.

[*Africapolis*](http://africapolis.org/home)

Rather, rapid population growth and development *within* rural areas has led to the emergence of thousands of small urban agglomerations. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of agglomerations of 10,000 to 100,000 people grew by nearly 50 percent.

This pattern is especially evident in the Great Lakes region of East Africa, which has experienced the greatest rates of urbanization since 2000.

*Human settlements dot Rwanda's green hills |*[*Francisco Anzola*](https://www.flickr.com/photos/fran001/41384090615)

In the forests and mountains of Kenya, Uganda, and Rwanda, natural barriers (such as rivers and valleys) have produced narrow “corridors” of development, and many of the urban agglomerations here span several administratively independent cities or settlements.

**Dig into the data on your own**

The maps above use data from [Africapolis](http://africapolis.org/home" \t "_blank), a project of the [Sahel and West Africa Club](https://www.oecd.org/swac/) in collaboration with [e-geopolis.org](https://e-geopolis.org/).

It's pretty extensive data, and this brief discussion has only started to scratch the surface of it. You can peruse more of its analysis on Africapolis' own site, or download it and dive in that way.

[**Download the data**](http://africapolis.org/data)

Or, if you'd like a head start, find the layers above in ArcGIS Online, pull them directly into a web map of your own from there, and see what other trends you can uncover on your own.

[**Find the map in ArcGIS**](https://arcg.is/0rbbWn)

*This story was created by Esri's StoryMaps team. Ross Donihue, Greyson Harris, and Cooper Thomas took the lead on cartography, while Allen Carroll, Michelle Thomas, and Hannah Wilber assisted with graphics, research, and writing. Learn more about ArcGIS StoryMaps—and build a story of your own—*[*here*](https://www.esri.com/storymaps)*.*

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