



Rural-Urban and Urban-Rural Migration  
Flows as Indicators of Economic  
Opportunity in Sub-Saharan Africa:  
What Do the Data Tell Us?

Deborah Potts

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Migrating out of Poverty  
University of Sussex, Arts B  
Brighton BN1 9QN, United Kingdom  
Email: [migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk)  
Web: <http://migratingoutofpoverty.org>  
Twitter: @MigrationRPC  
Facebook: /migratingoutofpoverty  
Blogger: [migratingoutofpoverty.blogspot.co.uk](http://migratingoutofpoverty.blogspot.co.uk)

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## Abstract

Migration flows can be sensitive indicators of the geography of economic opportunity and vitality. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) assumptions are too often made about the scale and direction of migration flows between rural and urban areas and about the ubiquity of rapid urbanisation across the region. This can divert attention from the economic realities of the developmental landscape in individual countries and from the increasing differentiation between them. This paper will demonstrate, using census data and other sources, that the rate at which urbanisation levels have recently been increasing in many large mainland SSA countries where the majority of SSA people live has significantly reduced, although some continue to urbanise very rapidly. It will also show that SSA is not, as is often asserted, the world's fastest urbanising region: many Asian countries (according to UN Habitat data) are urbanising faster. A key reason why SSA urbanisation levels in some countries are rising more slowly is changes in the net rate of in-migration to urban areas in many countries, often because of rising rates of circular migration related to weak urban economies. This paper will discuss the reasons why misleading ideas about SSA urbanisation remain common and reflect upon the need to study in greater depth the ways in which the region's current natural-resource based GDP growth feeds through into urbanisation and migration flows.

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## 1: Background to this paper

In recent years two main positions have been adopted in regard to the interrelated dynamics of African urban populations, rural-urban migration and urban economies. These have been reviewed in a recent article in *World Development* (Potts 2012b) and are therefore only briefly sketched here. The first is positive: rapid urban growth, fuelled by in-migration is assumed to be associated with agglomeration economies, innovation etc. The second position is that urbanisation fuelled by rural-urban migration in Sub-Saharan Africa is a puzzle, as in the 1980s and 1990s and early 2000s it was generally not backed by urban-based investment, job creation or much formal enterprise growth.<sup>1</sup> Both positions tend to take the basic assumption that rapid urbanisation – an increase in the urban share of the national population – *is* occurring across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), in every country and every region.

However, data from a variety of sources, including censuses, remote sensing of nucleated settlements by Africapolis, and a myriad of surveys on individual towns and rural areas across SSA, suggests that the picture has become more complicated. There is an important chronology in the region's urbanisation, relating to broad economic policy directions and the impacts of post-1980 globalisation, which should be recognised. In the first decade or two of independence, most countries did experience rapid in-migration and urbanisation, as modernisation policies encouraged this. However, the post-1980 Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), driven by the resurgence of liberalism in global economic institutions, transformed the underlying income gaps between rural and urban areas in SSA that had driven net rural-urban migration. In some cases, when comparing the types of incomes likely for an urban in-migrant with the real incomes of some rural areas in the same country over this latter period, the two reversed.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, income levels were higher in the rural areas under study than the incomes available for those who had migrated to the town. Urban economies weakened sharply, de-industrialisation was common, many formal jobs were lost, real urban incomes dropped severely (sometimes by as much as 90 per cent (Potts 1997) and African cities, which already had large informal sectors, informalised to startling degrees. The problem was that SSA urban economies found it very hard to compete on the global stage for investment in *urban-located* productive enterprises that could generate large numbers of formal sector jobs paying steady incomes. SSA countries lacked the following: adequate and efficient infrastructure (e.g. in energy); the capacity to invest strategically in urban employment-creating sectors in ways that did not directly flout the strictures of the World Trade Organization; and large educated labour forces. By contrast, the new international division of labour fostered by

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<sup>1</sup> Although Fay and Opal (2000) argued that the disconnect between African urban economic and urban population growth in the late twentieth century was explicable, theirs was a less common view and, as with the two main positions, drew on flawed population data.

<sup>2</sup> Such comparisons are notoriously difficult but – factoring in the extra costs of urban living (which is highly variable between towns) and the food produced in addition to rural incomes – there are many studies that argue this point for countries across SSA in the 1980s and 1990s (Satterthwaite and Tacoli 2002; Satterthwaite 2010; Chibuye 2011).

neo-liberalism favoured the comparative advantages of the markets in labour and capital in numerous Asian countries, many of which had already managed to establish the basic human and institutional capital required to compete on the international stage for *urban* jobs, often in manufacturing. Furthermore, simple geography proved a disadvantage. Many African countries are landlocked, which creates a significant competitive disadvantage in any activity involving trade, while as the centre of global economic gravity shifted towards Asia, the fact of proximity enhanced the competitiveness of third countries within that region for any outsourcing of the cheaper end of supply chain activities.

According to migration theory, the changes in the 1980s and 1990s would have reduced rural-urban migration and thus slowed urbanisation. However, many mainstream analyses of that period have instead maintained that the speed at which national populations were becoming more urban remained unchanged, with some even arguing that it was accelerating (e.g. see Tiffen 2003). But such analyses tended to be based on flawed data about urban population trends and rises in urbanisation levels in SSA countries. In reality, the data sources mentioned earlier have recorded a slowing in the shift from rural to urban settlements and the consequent rise in the level of urbanisation in many countries – so African rural-urban migrants have turned out to be as logical as any others and indeed conform to theoretical expectations.

The detailed evidence about these changes, drawn from surveys and censuses across Africa, can be found in Potts (2010). A key point is that growth rates of urban populations (which should not be confused with *urbanisation*) in SSA have generally been fuelled by high natural increase rates for decades. These were often nearly as high as rural natural increase rates, but could not lead to urbanisation – *meaning a rise in the proportion of people living in towns* – since this only occurs if urban growth exceeds the national population growth rate. For Africa as a whole, it has been estimated that the contribution of net in-migration to urban growth was about 40 per cent in the 1960s and 1970s, but fell to only 25 per cent in the 1980s. Net rural out-migration rates in Africa were also reported to have fallen from 1.07 per thousand in the 1960s to 0.5 in the 1980s (Chen *et al.* 1998, 2004).<sup>3</sup> Once this is recognised, it becomes much easier to understand that a lowering in the propensity to migrate to town, and also in the likelihood for in-migrants to stay there for long periods of time, can have quite marked impacts on the rate at which populations become more urban.

As noted, authoritative reviews comparing African urbanisation with other global regions have acknowledged the changes in the role and scale of migration, even before recent censuses provided more data for investigation in SSA. But these analyses have been insufficiently recognised. In part, this may be because a shift in focus has taken place in migration studies in SSA over the past two decades, away from internal

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<sup>3</sup> The calculations for net rural out-migration are based on censuses from 17 African countries, including 5 from North Africa, but the coverage of the time period is incomplete; specific rates have to be treated with some caution, therefore, even if the direction of change can be regarded with greater confidence.

migration *within* countries. Most funding and scholarship has shifted to the study of international migration between African countries, and emigration out of SSA. This is probably because this type of migration draws the attention of the destination countries and the funding bodies located there. Thus, in the UK there has been great interest in research on the African (and other) 'diasporas', partly with a view to assess their role in 'development' in their countries of origin (see, for example, the discussion in Mercer *et al.* 2009). There is also much work funded in the EU, and in other destination countries, particularly South Africa, on so-called 'illegal' immigrants, although often the real issue being investigated is local debates and politics about immigrants more broadly. The human rights issues of the (sometimes terrible) conditions and fates of some migrants when travelling and trying to find work in the EU also attracts much academic and policy interest. Part of this is the understandable scholarly and political concern with the roots and outcomes of xenophobia (e.g. McDonald *et al.* 1998; Landau *et al.* 2005; Mosselson 2010). Nonetheless, internal migration flows in most SSA countries far exceed international movements and thus continue to require research – usually rural-rural movements are the largest (and in terms of studies) (Bilsborrow 1998; Lucas 2007), but rural-urban movements remain significant.

The migration flow that has been least studied recently, however, is urban-rural migration. There is much evidence that in many countries, and for many towns, this type of migration increased, as urban economies faltered and declined in the last decades of the twentieth century in SSA. SSA countries have a long history of strong economic and social links between rural and urban areas. The nature and reasons for these links, or at least their relative strength, differed between countries due to specific economic and political histories and cultural norms. It is possible to discern differences between West Africa and southern Africa in particular, both in terms of the empirical patterns and the scholarly traditions of study about these patterns (see Potts 2010 for a detailed discussion; see also Ferguson 1999 regarding southern African traditions; for an early and insightful review see Epstein 1967). In a very general sense, southern African scholarship historically tended to focus on the negative structural conditions imposed by colonialism, in particular white settler states, which institutionalised patterns of circular migration and enforced the maintenance of rural-urban links. West African scholarship, however, was more likely to treat circular migration and rural-urban links as prosaic norms reflecting political and cultural regional traditions – which were not always constructed in terms of the impact of colonialism or capitalism – as well as economic factors. East African scholarship on these phenomena fell somewhere between the other two regional approaches, with quite a strong tendency to theorise them in neo-classical economic terms (e.g. see Elkan 1967, 1985). There was a great deal of overlap between these broad regional approaches and focuses. However, the southern African tradition often viewed circular migration in negative terms due to its enforced nature in that region for so many generations. As scholarship in the social sciences has moved away from the old metanarratives which underpinned these differences, more recent studies are less differentiated, although a tendency to view circular migration as outdated and problematic remains in some South African studies.



## 2: Circular migration and urbanisation in Sub-Saharan Africa

As noted, African urban areas are characterised by extreme levels of informality, in economic activities as well as in the production and consumption of many essential services such as housing and water. Most urban residents tend to be poor, and many are very poor and struggle to cover their daily basic needs. In current livelihood terms, most urban livelihoods are vulnerable and lack resilience. In the global North urban livelihoods were similarly vulnerable for the majority in the historical past, as people were divorced from the means of production and reliant on selling their labour to employers or self-employment in petty trade or services. Just as in SSA cities today, in the absence of comprehensive welfare nets, earning an income was a necessity no matter the conditions. The alternative was to starve and many did. However, not only were formal sector jobs in towns being created at rapid rates in Europe and North America, a combination of pressures from above and below also transformed these conditions as the elements of the welfare state (pensions, unemployment benefits, social grants etc.) were gradually established (e.g. Green 2010). This way, the cruder aspects of vulnerability inherent for workers under capitalism were removed whilst working conditions and wages improved. The provision of social housing (largely by philanthropy in its early stages) was another fundamental aspect of such livelihood improvements. Hence, the need for absolutely desperate livelihood measures in the towns in order to remain fed and sheltered in the event of an economic slump was reduced.

In sub-Saharan African cities, as yet, the fundamental aspects of livelihood vulnerability for most residents remain. With few exceptions (notably South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and, to an extent, Senegal)<sup>4</sup> (Ellis *et al.* 2009), welfare nets are minimal and have no structural impact. Just as in the European and North American cities of the past, urban dwellers must cultivate economic and social networks to hedge against the inherent risks of their existence; this is true both for those born in the city and migrants, most of whom come from rural areas within the country (i.e. are not immigrants). Charity and churches play a significant role, just as they did in urban welfare in Europe and North America. In-migrants who are less established (partly because they tend to be youthful), less locally connected, and perhaps less skilled or educated, may be the most vulnerable to working in particularly low paid sectors. Such jobs may pay too little to support a household, and only 'single' migrants renting and perhaps sharing one room, or dependents living within, and partly supported by, a larger household, may be able to 'afford' to work in such jobs. If economic conditions worsen and real incomes fall in other sectors, then families may have to disperse to similar conditions, because they cannot afford to live as a family unit. This is a very familiar picture for scholars of African urbanisation, since much of colonial urban employment, pay and housing policy was predicated on a 'preference' for 'single'

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<sup>4</sup> These are the only countries so far to have introduced universal pensions for old people. Cash transfers and other grant systems are gaining some ground in rural areas in Africa.

workers whose families often had to remain in rural areas as there was neither the space nor the money for them to live in towns. Aspects of these income, employment and household composition issues, and their interaction with migrancy, can be observed in cities across the world, including in developed countries, and they remain fundamental determinants of livelihood patterns in sub-Saharan African towns.

One outcome of livelihood vulnerability has been an increased propensity for mobility, not just into towns, but *out* of them as well. Researching and establishing trends in circular migration into and out of towns is tricky. Here circular migration is defined as migration into a town and then, at some point, which could be a year or even decades later, movement out of the town. In contemporary SSA this usually means return to the rural area of origin but it is not uncommon for migrants to move to another rural area, which is why it helps not to talk about 'return' migration in this context. Containing migration data in census reports may help. However, short- to medium-term circular movements that occur within the intercensal period are not captured and thus remain 'hidden'. For research conducted within towns rather than rural areas, which study the extent of urban-rural flows, the problem is that the out-migrants involved are, by definition, no longer available to interview. The subjects of study can only be those in town, examining their views and plans. Although there are arguments that their stated plans may either over- or under-estimate the propensity to leave the city in the future, they are a useful indication of migration patterns, particularly if it is possible to compare migrant cohorts' intentions over time using the same methodology to establish a trend. This sort of research has been conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe, and found that there was a major increase in the propensity of migrants who anticipated a move out of the city between 1985 and 2001. In addition, their anticipated length of stay in town reduced over this same period (Potts 2006, 2010) (see Table 1). By 2001 only 13 per cent felt sure they could or would stay in town, compared to about one third in the 1980s. There was no doubt that these patterns were primarily caused by the economic problems and insecurity of urban life. Hundreds of interviews demonstrated this: migrants repeatedly explained how lack of secure employment and reasonable incomes in relation to necessary survival costs, and the threat of destitution if income streams failed, for whatever reason, were the reasons they anticipated an eventual move out of Harare. Some looked forward to the move, others were unhappy about it but felt it was unavoidable. Similar reasons for, and ambivalent feelings about, 'return' migration were evident in research on mining migrants in Zambia in the 1990s by Ferguson (1999).

**Table 1 Migrants' future plans in Harare: 1985, 1988, 1994 and 2001**

Future Plans	% of migrants			
	1985	1988	1994	2001
Staying permanently in Harare	34	36	19	13
Don't know**	2**	15	12	10
Leaving after 'retirement'	18	37*	3	7
Leaving before 'retirement': of which, planned length of stay:	45	12*	65	31
<1 year	4	3	4	8
1-5 years	7	5	9	14
6-10 years	8	4	9	3
>10 years then leave	23	*	43	7
Don't know**	3**	**	**	**
Expect to leave: timing unspecified	**	**	**	39

Notes: Columns may not add precisely to 100% etc. due to rounding.

\* In the 1988 survey those planning to stay over 10 years and then leave, were coded under 'leaving after retirement'. This figure of 36% is therefore comparable to the combined categories of 'leaving after retirement' and 'leaving before retirement but staying for more than ten years' (equivalent to 41%, 46% and 14% respectively for 1985 and 1994 and 2001).

\*\* In 1988, 1994 and 2001 there was only one coded category of 'don't knows' for all those not sure of their future plans. In 1985 they were disaggregated between those who were not sure if they would stay or leave Harare, and those who knew they would leave but could not specify when. In 2001 most of those who responded 'don't know' went on to explain where they planned to go and how they would obtain land there so they did expect to leave but were just uncertain of when.

In West Africa, longitudinal research by Gugler in the Nigerian town of Enugu also found a significantly increase, when comparing his first survey in 1961 with a follow-up survey in 1987, in residents claiming that they would eventually leave the town. In his view these patterns evidently 'required a structural interpretation' (Gugler 2002: 23). The significance of widespread retrenchments in the city in the 1970s and 1980s and the dwindling usefulness of any pensions were suggested as important causative factors. His findings fitted with his earlier assessment that 'permanent family migration is not an option for many, probably most Africans, in the absence of unemployment/invalidity/retirement benefits' (Gugler 1989: 348). Such materialist considerations are far from the only factors involved in circular migration of this type, as rural-urban linkages in SSA are bound up with strong social, cultural and political issues, all of which are acknowledged and examined in the research discussed above. Nonetheless, the materialist considerations have unquestionably been dominant.

Other surveys that have indicated the heightened significance of circular migration and of reduced in-migration to towns in many SSA countries are numerous, and are

reviewed in Potts (2010). In West Africa, the evidence included the results of a large-scale migration project across the region covering 1988 to 1992 (NESMUWA – the Network of Surveys on Migration and Urbanization in West Africa). This survey found that net out-migration rates from many rural areas across francophone West Africa appeared to be falling, as well as a marked tendency for rural out-migrants to be moving to other countries, including outside Africa, thus bypassing urban settlements in their own countries (Beauchemin and Bocquier 2004). A recent case study of Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) summarised the livelihood predicament faced by so many in sub-Saharan Africa, and the impact on migration patterns, in the following way:

Due to the precariousness of living conditions, Congolese people are constantly moving, both within the nation and externally, looking for opportunities to get by – a kind of ‘strategic nomadism.... the *Lushois* (the residents of Lubumbashi) [and] the [foreign] African migrants in Lubumbashi are generally characterised by a culture of mobility – they constantly move back and forth between the city and other locations within and outside the country (Bakewell and Jonsson 2011: 5).

Further important indications of increasing circular migration, or reduced in-migration to towns, has come from censuses. Although SSA censuses were sporadic from the 1980s, a significant number were conducted in the latter years of the twentieth century and the first decade or so of the twenty-first century, giving us an important opportunity to assess trends in urban population change. Evidently, such change is based not only on migration but, for individual towns (rather than the urban hierarchy as a whole where factors like redefinition of small rural settlements as urban complicate matters), it is possible to use triangulation with what is known about rural versus urban birth and death rates to get a general idea of the contribution of net in-migration to urban population growth in an intercensal period. For large mainland countries with populations over about 2.5 million, in which the vast majority of sub-Saharan Africans live, these recent censuses have been showing that in many cases the difference between the growth rate of many large towns and the population of the country as a whole has been much smaller than has been projected by most authorities (local and international). Given the earlier point about how urban and rural natural increase rates remained quite similar until very recently (see Tables 2 and 3 for Zambia and Zimbabwe: note that falls in urban birth rates can be countered by lower urban death rates for children),<sup>5</sup> this could only have occurred if net in-migration was smaller than anticipated. The main reason for the overestimation of urbanisation levels in SSA has been that projections tended to be based on the presumption that formerly very high net in-migration was continuing. In some cases, census evidence showing the contrary was not factored in for long periods.

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<sup>5</sup> The 2010 Demographic and Health Survey for Tanzania records very similar crude birth rates for rural and urban areas too. The rural rate was 39 and the urban rate 35 (United Republic of Tanzania 2013).

**Table 2: Zambian demographic indices 1980, 1990 and 2000: national, rural and urban**

Demographic index	Total Zambia			Rural			Urban		
	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000
Crude birth rate	37	44	36	36	45	40	40	43	29
Total fertility rate	7.2	6.7	6.0	7.2	7.0	6.7	7.6	6.3	4.9
Infant mortality rate	99	123	110	106	130	117	89	106	91
Under-five mortality rate	121	151	162	132	164	180	108	128	126
Life expectancy at birth	52	47	50	50	45	48	54	51	54
Adult mortality		12.2	14.3			10			16

Sources: Censuses and Demographic Health surveys

**Table 3: Zimbabwe demographic indices 2001-2, national, Harare, Bulawayo**

Provincial population growth indices 1992-2002						
Province	Population 1992 '000s	Population 2002 '000s	Crude birth rate 2001-02	Crude death rate 2001-02	Natural increase 2001-02 %	AAGR 1992-2002 %
Zimbabwe	10,412	11,632	30.3	17.2	1.3	1.1
Harare a	1,537	1,896	30.5	10.6	2.0	2.1
Bulawayo b	622	677	27.0	13.9	1.3	0.8

Source: compiled or calculated from data in CSO (2004), CSO (nd.)

1. Harare province essentially comprised three separately designated urban areas in 2002, Harare, Chitungwiza and Epworth, which essentially function as an urban conglomeration. The rural population of the province only accounts for about 1% of the population.
2. Bulawayo province comprises Bulawayo city; the two are synonymous

It is important at this point to emphasise that this must not be construed as suggesting that: (a) urban populations in SSA are not growing fast or (b) that there is not much migration at all. These false conclusions are so often drawn from the argument being made that it is crucial to fend them off (for example see Potts 2012a for a detailed refutation of these arguments/conclusions. Most towns still experience rapid population growth and some net in-migration, it is just that frequently neither have been as high as projected and most of the growth comes from natural increase. Figure 1 models various scenarios of how similar rates of urban population growth can be fuelled by different combinations of in- and out-migration and urban natural increase. As shown, scenarios 2B and 2C bring about annual population growth of around 3 per cent, which would mean the population would double in about 23 years, equivalent to the natural increase rate (which could be similar to that of the national population), but incorporate considerable migration as well. Even when annual urban growth falls below probable national rates, as in scenario 3, this can still incorporate considerable in-migration (counterbalanced by high out-migration) as in Scenarios 3B and 3C.

Where data are available, it is often apparent that many migrants still move to towns from rural areas. However, it is also apparent that many also leave them, and consequently the net rate of in-migration has fallen (see Tables 4 and 5 for Zambia and Zimbabwe in the 1990s). When triangulating this with surveys such as those discussed above, which indicate changing migration patterns due to livelihood problems in towns, a picture emerges revealing a significant shift in migration trends from about the 1980s to the early 2000s. It also indicates that many countries remain more rural than expected.

In Zambia such shifts were so significant that during the 1980s and 1990s net migration for the country was urban-rural because the Copperbelt towns' economies, in particular, were so weak that people were leaving them in very large numbers (Table 4). Some went to Lusaka, but the national migration data showed clearly that most turned to rural areas (Potts 2005). This included some people born in towns on the Copperbelt, indicating that it was not a purely circular migration issue. In Cote d'Ivoire, census analysis also showed that out-migration, particularly of Ivorian citizens, from towns (including Abidjan) caused the share of the population in settlements with more than 5,000 residents to fall between 1988 and 1998 (Beauchemin 2002; Beauchemin and Bocquier 2004). This meant that both countries counter-urbanised in these time periods, with their populations becoming less urban. The census evidence suggests this was also the case in Mali during the years 1987-98 and in Central African Republic during 1988-2003. The comparison of urban versus national population growth in these countries is depicted in Figure 2. As shown, net in-migration to capital cities tended to continue, although much less strongly than in the 1960s and 1970s, and the net out-migration tended to occur in towns further down the urban hierarchy. Obviously each country has its own specific variations with some towns growing faster than others, but the overall point remains: taken together, town populations grew more slowly than the national population.

**Table 4: Net in-migration indices by province, Zambia, 1990-2000**

Province/Area	Mid-point popn. 1990-2000 ('000s)	Net migrants ('000s)	Net migration rate (per'000)
Rural Zambia	5,168	+144.3	+2.8
Urban Zambia	3,114	-146.1	-4.7
Predominantly urban provinces:			
Copperbelt	1,501	-206.0	-137
Lusaka	1,170	+70.1	+59
Central	853	+24.9	+29
Southern	1,047	-26.2	-25
Predominantly rural provinces:			
Eastern	1,120	-2.1	-2
Luapula	637	+41.8	+66
Northern	1,035	+64.1	+62
Northwestern	474	+39.4	+83
Western	680	-7.1	-10

Source: CSO (2003) Note: Rural and urban net migrants and rates have been calculated from raw data as the totals in the report tables are errors.

**Table 5: Net in-migration indices for Zimbabwe's main towns, 1990s**

Inter-censal Migration in main towns						
Province	2002 census population >10 yrs <sup>a</sup>	In-migrants 1992-2002/ census popn in 2002 %	As % of population aged >10 years in 1992			
			Resident in 1992 and 2002	In-migrants 1992-2002	Out-migrants 1992-2002	Net gain 1992-2002 migration <sup>b</sup>
Harare	1,397,596	34	75	38	-25	13
Bulawayo	514,524	30	75	32	-25	6

Source: calculated from data in 2002 census table 3.3a, CSO (2004).

Notes: a. to compare populations in 1992 and 2002 the census tables exclude those under ten years of age in 2002 as they had not been born in 1992; to retain comparability the matrices used to generate inter-censal flows also exclude the under-tens in 1992. The CSO also excluded from the 2002 population those who reported that their place of enumeration had not been their main place of usual residence during the 12 months before that census.

b. Population resident in 2002 minus the 1992 residents still there in 2002 (= inter-censal in-migration), minus difference between 1992 resident population and the 1992 residents still there in 2002 (= inter-censal out-migration).

c. Percentages may not add exactly due to rounding

Ten other censuses, from Mozambique, Malawi, Uganda, Ethiopia, Sudan, Senegal, Mauritania, Niger, Togo and Benin, have shown that urban growth rates have not been sufficiently in excess of national population growth for rapid 'urbanisation' – the rise in the level of urbanisation – to have occurred (Figure 3). Again, there is much variation between countries in terms of which towns in the urban hierarchy have experienced growth at around or below the national rate. Capital cities have not always been the fastest growing. Each country's experience requires detailed analysis, which cannot be provided here, and the same factors are not always at play to the same extent. In terms of the big picture of urbanisation and rural-urban migration, however, the situation for these nations is that the urbanised population rose by only around 1 to 2 per cent over their various intercensal periods (i.e. a decade or longer, sometimes much longer). Thus while net rural-urban migration occurred, it was not fast enough to bring about a dramatic shift in the rural/urban composition of the population. In every case the outcome was a population significantly less urbanised than what had been projected by agency data, such as those produced by UN Habitat.

There is reason to believe that Nigeria might be included in this second group of countries, which is that it has been urbanising more slowly than expected. Indeed, according to Africapolis data for Nigeria's nucleated settlements, based on triangulating census and remotely sensed data, the whole country is far less urbanised than is generally stated. In the view of the scholars analysing these data, around one third of the population is currently urbanised, in contrast to the roughly one half stated by most UN sources. Attempting to analyse Nigerian census data is always very controversial, as the figures are highly politically charged and deeply contested, and full data sets are never released. However, having made such an attempt, I have shown elsewhere that it may be possible that the majority of large towns there have experienced slow growth relative to the country as a whole from the 1980s to 2006 (Potts 2012b).

In strong contrast to these cases, a smaller number of countries have experienced precisely the very rapid urbanisation fuelled by net in-migration, as is usually argued for SSA, demonstrated by large cities growing much faster than the national growth rate. These are Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Ghana (see Figure 4). Ghana's census is recent and full details of urban settlement populations have not yet been published, which inhibits analysis. However it is possible to deduce from the online Final Report (Ghana Statistical Service 2012) the populations of some large urban areas, which indicate that there is much variation in the intercensal growth rates. Accra Metropolis (as opposed to the urban population of the entire Greater Accra area) grew very slowly during the years 2000-10, at about 0.1 per cent per year, compared to 3.4 per cent over the previous intercensal period (1984-2000), but there was much stronger urban growth beyond its immediate boundaries. Greater Accra region's urban population grew from 2.6 million to 3.6 million at an annual rate of 3.4 per cent, compared to a national rate of 2.5 per cent. Much faster urban growth, which must have included considerable net in-migration, was recorded by other large towns. Kumasi metropolitan area was at first recorded as the country's largest single town, with 2 million people, and had



experienced extremely rapid annual growth since 1984: 5.5 per cent from 1984 to 2000 and 5.4 per cent from 2000 to 2010. Subsequent adjustments to the census put Accra Metropolis just ahead of Kumasi. Even faster growth occurred in Ghana's main ports, with Sekondi-Takoradi growing at 6.1 per cent per year from 2000 to 2010, and Tema (which is part of Greater Accra) at 6.7 per cent.<sup>6</sup> The level of urbanisation shot up from 43.8 per cent in 2000 to 50.9 per cent in 2010, an increase of 7 per cent, which is way above the 1 to 2 per cent increases experienced in many other countries. Like Cameroon, Ghana appears to mirror the 'received wisdom' about SSA's rapid urbanisation. It is worth noting that in 2000 about half of Ghana's urban population lived in small towns of 5,000 to 50,000 (Owusu 2012) and that a simple size threshold of 5,000 determines urban status. In 2000, the share of the population in towns with populations over about 18,000 (as listed in Ghana Statistical Services 2002, cited in Brinkhoff 2012) was 30.5 per cent. A significant element of the increase in urbanisation is likely to have been generated by redefinition of previous villages, and how 'urban' these are economically will depend on the activity and employment characteristics of their residents, but such data are not currently available.

It was thought that Tanzania should also be categorised as part of this group given that Dar es Salaam has grown at around, or just under, 5 per cent annually for decades up to the last published census in 2002 (and all early reports of the 2012 census indicate that this has continued), and even more rapid growth was experienced in Arusha and Mwanza from 1988 to 2002. However, the lack of clarity over how many 'urban' settlements' populations are defined and assigned is such that different sources give different populations, and even change their figures over time, making it very difficult to establish meaningful growth trends. This is because there is no clear definition of what is urban in Tanzania, and recorded populations may also include, besides the main town, peri-urban wards, which are designated 'urban' and even mixed wards where much or part of the population is definitely rural. Very high proportions of both of these types of wards can be working in agriculture, undermining their claim to be 'urban' in economic terms. There is no doubt that this has led to a general overestimation of urban population growth (Potts 2004; Holm 1992, 1995). A recent study using migration data from the 2002 census estimates a very low contribution of net in-migration to urban growth during 2001-02, the year for which such data are available, of only 17 per cent overall, with the *'bulk of urban growth ..... driven by natural growth and physical urban expansion'* via reclassification of rural populations (Muzzini and Lindeboom 2008: 49, emphasis added). Yet it also establishes high rates of both in- and out-migration from many settlements, precisely in line with the circular migration scenarios discussed above. Rural-urban and urban-rural migration flows in 2001-02 totalled about 389,000 people, but net migration was only around 44,000 (5.3 per cent of the urban population compared to 0.6 per cent). In addition, about 190,000 moved between urban centres. In sum, Muzzini and Lindeboom (2008: 76) argue that in Tanzania, during the 1990s,

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<sup>6</sup> These calculations are based on combining the separately recorded populations for Sekondi and Takoradi, and Tema and Tema New Town, in the 2000 census, and comparing these with the published figures for Sekondi Takoradi Metropolis and Tema in the 2010 census.

'internal migration is shaping the urban transition but its contribution to urban population growth is modest', meaning that it was still playing a role in urbanisation by contributing to urban population growth but that that contribution had considerably dropped compared to the past. As a very rough rule of thumb, my own estimations for the contribution of net migration to urbanisation in SSA countries have compared the growth rate of individual towns, groups of towns or, where possible, all urban settlements, with the national population growth rate, assuming a rough parity in rural and urban natural increase rates until very recently, for reasons explained above (e.g. Potts 2012a; 2009). The disadvantage of this method is that, especially when including smaller settlements, the impact of redefinition of previously rural populations as urban is missed, and thus the method will still tend to overestimate net in-migration. In the case of Tanzania, where the urban population enumerated in the censuses increased at an annual average of 4.1 per cent between 1988 and 2002 (ibid), and the national population at 2.9 per cent per year, this 'rule of thumb' method indicates net in-migration would have constituted around 29 per cent of urban population growth. As can be seen, the complexities of the Tanzanian urban definition issue, where there is evidently much re-classification at the lower end of the urban hierarchy, suggests that this would have been a significant overestimate for the 1990s and that rural-urban migration was contributing even far less than I estimated in my own cautious analysis. To complicate things even further, Muzzini and Lindeboom (2008) point out that there are four possible ways of calculating the urbanisation level in Tanzania in 2002, depending on which sorts of settlements are included. Excluding a purely density-based definition, these yield urbanisation levels from only 17 per cent in 2002 if local government areas (LGAs) that have been gazetted with urban status are included, to the 23 per cent derived from census data. Given these circumstances, it is clear that it is very difficult to assess Tanzania's urbanisation rates on the basis of existing data. Also, given that it has been ten years since full details of a census were published, the figures for individual urban settlements from the 2012 census will be of great interest, especially if the data make it possible to disaggregate more clearly between functionally urban populations and other areas.

Similar difficulties exist when estimating urban population dynamics and in the case of rural-urban migration in Kenya. Kenya has started to enumerate both 'core' urban areas and 'peri-urban' areas as urban. The 'peri-urban' areas are not, however, necessarily within urban administrative boundaries but are frequently rural areas with higher than average population densities that are 'considered to be in a transition between rural and urban' (World Bank 2011: 35). The subsequent muddle as former core urban areas were compared with combined core and peri-urban areas to derive growth rates and trends in the country's urbanisation was anticipated when the 1999 census was made available: 'any UN or World Bank publications which use these data to calculate Kenya's total urban population in 1999 and its intercensal growth rate will be giving a totally false picture of the country's urban dynamics in the 1990s' (Potts 2004: 340). For many 'towns' the effect was extraordinary: in 1999, Vihiga 'municipality', for example, which had not been enumerated as urban previously, was recorded as having an urban

population of 109,000, a figure that was absurdly inflated. By 2009 its 'urban' population had risen, according to the census, to only 119,000, made up of a core urban population of about 36,000 and a 'peri-urban' population of around 82,000. On the one hand this appears to imply that in the intervening period this 'town' must have experienced significant net out-migration, since its average annual growth rate was around 0.8 per cent, far below the Kenyan average of 3 per cent. However, once it is recognised that this municipality mainly comprised a dense rural area (which is easily established by checking on Google maps), the implication may well be that the area experienced out-migration that might possibly have been partly rural-urban in character (i.e. rural people were leaving Vihiga for other, truly urban, localities). Equally, there could have been out-migration of a rural-rural character driven by land shortage. The implications for analyses of migration and urbanisation are evidently entirely different. By 2009, the proportion of Kenya's population living in both urban and peri-urban areas was 30 per cent – a headline figure touted by one World Bank publication as proof of Kenya's economic vigour (World Bank 2011). Yet the 'real' core urbanisation level is much lower at 23 per cent. Therefore, and similar to Tanzania, it is not only difficult to know how fast Kenya is becoming urban, but the extent of the role of rural-urban migration in that change is also very hard to ascertain with the currently available data.

These examples indicate the need for scholarly or policy analysis to develop reasonable definitions of what is considered 'urban'. They also indicate that this definitional problem is becoming an increasingly significant issue in sub-Saharan Africa. The next section discusses this issue in greater detail and demonstrates why it now needs to be taken into account in any regional analyses of urbanisation and migration.

### 3: The significance of urban definitions: comparative urbanism and sub-Saharan Africa

Different countries adopt different definitions to decide which settlements are counted as 'urban'. These definitions can vary significantly, which – if the differences are not factored in or understood – can confound comparison between countries. Most definitions mix a threshold size criterion with an index of urban function that is usually linked to *the relative absence of agricultural land or employment*.

In urban studies there is now a strong call for a comparative urban approach (Robinson 2006; Mcfarlane 2008; Myers 2011; Parnell and Robinson 2012). This, however, does not mean comparing one city or urban system with another in a simplistic way. Rather, it is a call for urban studies to be more global in its approach, recognising the significance of the experiences and attributes of urban settlements in *all* global regions (and not only the Global North) for theorising urbanisation. It recognises the need to understand that similar global processes operate in urban areas across the world, to identify these and, subsequently, how they work their way through particular cities and urban systems with specific histories and roles. It also acknowledges that the

experiences of the cities of the developing world and emerging economies are now more 'typical' and thus need more prominence in developing contemporary understandings of urban economies, politics and sociology.

Unquestionably, the issue of defining what is 'urban' is a rather prosaic one in relation to this call; issues of land tenure or urban governance and politics are seemingly far more exciting. However, it does have an important part to play, not least because so many 'big picture' analyses of urbanisation in world regions or individual countries start with statements<sup>7</sup> about the level of urbanisation and the rate of urban population growth with direct comparisons made with other countries or regions. These then set the scene for the rest of the analysis, which frequently refers back to the points 'established' in the first paragraphs as touchstones for explaining why the study is of significance. But what if the earlier statements are wrong? Then, parts of the subsequent analysis are bound to be flawed. This is why the comparative aspect of urban 'statistics' can be crucial.

Here, the focus is on the *structural economic* aspects of urbanisation. By this I mean taking into account the extent to which nucleated settlements have activity patterns which are not based on agriculture, in particular, nor forestry or small-scale fishing. There is an argument for assessing the developments of nucleated settlements, per se, or those of rural densification, both of which have significant impacts on politics, sociology and the possibilities for service provision. But most broad analyses of SSA urbanisation today do not take these issues as their starting point. Instead their focus is very much on the economics of urbanisation. The presumption, often made explicitly but sometimes also implicitly, is that the population 'designated' as urban has moved away from rural activities and is working in 'urban' employment in secondary and tertiary sectors. Much is often made of the fact that 'urbanisation' is associated with higher GDP per person, because workers in towns are employed in higher value-added activities associated with higher incomes, which thus is a positive economic factor (e.g. World Bank 2009b; McKinsey Global Institute 2010; Collier 2013).<sup>8</sup> There is a tendency, therefore, to move from the statistics on urbanisation to the inference that these indicate *structural macro-economic change* in the SSA country or countries under study. Since it is usually argued that SSA is the world's fastest urbanising region, then the

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the UN Habitat 2008 State of African Cities report included the following: 'The 2007 overall urbanisation rate of the West and Central Africa region was 41.7 per cent. Seven of its 25 nations had more than half their population living in urban areas. .... The West African subregion is projected to have an urban majority just before 2020' (UN Habitat 2008: 11). Many of these figures were significant overestimates (see Potts 2012b). With reference to East Africa the same report stated, 'The world's shortest urban population doubling time, less than nine years, is found in the East Africa region, from 50.6 million in 2007 to a projected 106.7 million by 2017' (p. 11). This was completely wrong.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting at this point in the argument that - quite often - the same analyses acknowledge that many, or even most, of the urban employment is in the informal sector, where the advantages of specialisation of labour - a key factor in urban economic theory - are muted since so many are self-employed, and of these the majority are often traders on low incomes. However, although this also has impacts on the economic characteristics of African cities and undermines the extent to which activities can be associated with higher value-added, it is a somewhat separate issue from the one under discussion in this section of the paper.

inference is that it is also experiencing the world's fastest structural economic changes related to this urbanisation. This is highly problematic. One reason is that the improvements in GDP growth across SSA since about 2003, which have undoubtedly created economic changes, are generally associated with natural resource exploitation and not with urban-located employment in specialised work. A second reason is that these inferences are only logical if it is true that SSA is urbanising fastest, but this requires that we are comparing like with like. Thus, in terms of these *economic* analyses, it is crucial to consider the extent to which the urban populations enumerated in SSA countries are comparable to those in other regions of the world.

Unfortunately, in many studies of SSA countries, functional and employment characteristics are not used in urban definitions, and the threshold populations are very small. This means their recorded levels of urbanisation are elevated relative to other regions of the world. In other words, were some of the typical aspects of urban definitions used in other parts of the world applied to many SSA countries, African countries' urbanisation levels would often be lowered. Since SSA is nonetheless among the world's least urbanised regions when using local definitions, this means the gap between SSA and other parts of the world is currently larger than recognised.

Analyses of how the definitional issue affects our understandings of 'urbanisation' in different countries tend to use non-African examples, presumably because of the decades-long difficulties of getting access to complete African census datasets, and the frequent lack of reliable (or any) employment data. Nonetheless, the analyses are telling, as they provide insights into the astonishing reshaping of global urban geography which emerge when like is compared with like. Once this point is established, the reasons for discussing this issue in relation to African urban data become much clearer. Some examples (based on Corbridge and Jones 2010) are provided below.

- India: depending of the proportion of settlements with between 2,000 and 20,000 inhabitants in 2001 which is classified as urban, India's level of urbanisation changes dramatically. If most such settlements are classified as rural, the country would be less than 30 per cent urban. However if most are categorised as urban, then India would then have been recorded as being more than 60 per cent urban (Satterthwaite 2004).
- Bangladesh: if a Peruvian or Swedish definition of density to determine who is 'urban' is applied to Bangladesh, most of its population becomes 'urban'. Yet, the country is generally regarded as being about 80 per cent rural, with 89 per cent of the poor living in rural areas.
- Latin America: adoption of an OECD definition of 'urban' makes the region twice as 'rural' as government definitions suggest (World Bank 2005).

It is obvious from these examples that, generally, urban analyses are not comparing like with like and that many studies which refer to UN or World Bank data compilations to determine where particular countries fall in the ranks of urbanisation levels may draw

incorrect conclusions. Let us examine the example of India in further detail. The urbanisation level according to the census was 27.7 per cent in 2001 and 31.1 per cent in 2011. It uses a much stricter definition of urbanisation than nearly all SSA countries. In addition to statutory towns, it only includes settlements with over 5,000 people and a minimum density of 400 per square kilometre where at least 75 per cent of the male workforce is not working in agriculture. This last structural economic factor is crucial and means that one can be very confident that the urbanisation figures relate to functionally urban settlements. Given the analysis in the preceding section on Tanzania's urban census data, there can be no doubt that if such criteria were applied to its settlements, its urbanisation level would fall significantly. Or if India used Tanzania's vague and non-economic definitions, it is probable that India would 'become' mainly urban; it would cross the magic 50 per cent threshold and would appear to be more than twice as urban as Tanzania. Either way, the application of similar criteria provides a much clearer steer on the relative nature of the two countries' economic structures. As it is, the data usually used to compare them would suggest that there is not much difference in their level of urbanisation.

If we take the cases of Bangladesh and Kenya, similar points can be made about more realistic comparisons. Bangladesh's urbanisation level in 2001 according to its own definitions (definitive data for the 2011 census are not yet available) was 23 per cent, roughly the same as Kenya's 2011 core urban population level. As described previously, if densely populated but not necessarily urban areas are included in Kenya's 'urban' population, as in the 2009 census, it is 30 per cent urbanised. But if high densities were enough to classify areas in Bangladesh as urban, it would become considerably more urbanised than Kenya. So, is Bangladesh more or less urban than Kenya? Should investors anxious to cash in on new urban consumption potential be flocking to Bangladesh over Kenya? Is structural economic transformation more advanced in Bangladesh than Kenya? It is not easy to answer these questions based on these different sets of data and definitions, evidently; they do, however, show that there is a problem. Triangulating with another indicator offers further guidance: the World Bank's World Development Indicators record that for 2005 (the last date for which data are available for both countries) the proportion of total employment in agriculture was 48 per cent in Bangladesh and 61 per cent in Kenya. Even if these data are not entirely reliable, they do suggest, taken together with the analysis above, that Bangladesh is more urban and has a more diversified and modern economy, and that comparatively Kenya's current urbanisation level is overstated.

As with so many realms of academic study, rigorous comparative analysis of urbanisation can only be achieved when effort is put into ensuring that the same thing is being discussed: definitions matter. In the case of urbanisation levels, the impact on policy issues can be enormous. In both Bangladesh and India the sorts of redefinitions discussed would entirely redefine the analysis of urbanisation and migration in these countries, as well as the global perceptions of their character. They transform the geography of poverty and reclassify much migration as urban-urban rather than rural-

urban. Given that China is now apparently mainly urban, and Latin American has been for decades, if Bangladesh and India with their huge populations were added to this list, the case for shifting development policies and aid at the global level to 'urban' areas would become overwhelming. Migration research would immediately have to include more of a focus on urban-urban movements, and so on. At the same time, the outlier status of still mainly rural Africa would become much more obvious and domestic and foreign aid policies might also alter if this was realised.

This analysis is not calling for such drastic redefinitions. It is, however, calling for a recognition that SSA urban definitions tend to lead to comparatively generous estimates of urbanisation levels in many countries in the region. When combined with the point already established from analysis of SSA censuses – that they show that the rate at which such urbanisation levels have been rising is often quite slow – then the case becomes overwhelming for a more judicious and differentiated analysis of SSA urbanisation and migration, rather than a blanket assumption of very rapid real urbanisation across the continent.

#### 4: Is SSA the world's fastest urbanising region?

It has been explained that there has been considerable confusion over rates at which urbanisation levels are rising in SSA. Figure 5 graphs data on urbanisation levels in 2001 and 2010 downloaded from UN Habitat's urban indicators database. It demonstrates that Asian countries are generally urbanising faster. One reason why it is presumed that SSA is urbanising fastest is that fertility is higher in SSA, thus all population growth rates – national and urban – are higher than in Asia and elsewhere in the world. However, rises in urbanisation levels are not due to high population growth *per se*, but to the gap between urban growth and national growth, and recently this has been smaller in many large mainland African countries than in much of Asia.

This graph also demonstrates the considerable confusion that can arise, and *has arisen*, from the use of outdated projections and misleading definitions of 'urban'. It appears to show huge falls in urbanisation in many SSA countries in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This is evidently wrong, but the data are illustrated partly to indicate issues about urban data in SSA generally. Indeed, these data show actual counter-urbanisation for ten SSA countries from 2001 to 2010, and only small rises for four others. The notable exceptions are Cameroon, Rwanda and Ghana (all of which make sense except that Rwanda's surge in urban growth occurred in the 1990s rather than 2000s). The rather odd pattern for countries like Mauritania, Tanzania, Kenya, Senegal and Niger, where there is a huge difference between extremely high increases recorded for the 1990s followed by large reductions, is due to major corrections being made in the UN dataset for 2010 after it was recognised that the 2001 levels had been overestimated due to poor projections and/or misunderstandings of the data provided by African

governments.<sup>9</sup> In such cases, therefore, counter-urbanisation has not actually occurred; the real situation is simply that there has been quite gradual urbanisation over the past 20 years. However, as discussed above, the earlier poor projections have helped to distort understandings of SSA urbanisation and migration.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth noting that there are questions raised about how much more urban some SSA countries will become in the foreseeable future, given their recent past trends and demographic changes in fertility and mortality. One model suggests that overall SSA urban levels may stagnate around their current levels (estimated at lower than 40 per cent) with not much regional variation until 2050, in contrast to UN predictions of over 60 per cent by that time (Bocquier and Mukandila 2011).

## 5: Economic change and urbanisation

As discussed above, the issue of the nature of economic activity in nucleated settlements in SSA is highly significant for any meaningful analysis of the *economic* (as opposed to purely social or political) implications of current urban trends, because many reports on SSA urbanisation assume, unsurprisingly, that urbanisation means a shift not only from rural residence but also from agricultural and strictly rural occupations. It is taken as a proxy for significant economic transformation and a shift to higher value-added work and production. This is undoubtedly what has been occurring in Asian countries in recent decades.

By contrast, some of the data available for African countries indicate that in many small 'urban' settlements people are, in fact, farmers, which suggests that, in terms of economic structure, it would be more useful to consider these settlements as rural. They may not be attracting many migrants either, although this is highly variable when people move, often within districts, to be closer to services available in some of the more nucleated settlements. However, it might be debatable whether this should be deemed rural-urban or rural-rural migration. For example, somewhat astonishingly, in 2002 one third of those employed in the urban population of Tanzania (including large towns) was recorded as *working in agricultural activities*, although this was less than in 1988 when 45 per cent were engaged in agricultural activities. The 2002 situation suggests that the 'urban' status of certain towns was highly questionable in *economic* terms: for example, non-farm activities accounted for only 22 per cent of employment in the core urban areas in Kilosa, 36 per cent in Rufiji, 46 per cent in Lindi, and 52 per cent in Kigoma. In peri-urban wards described as mostly 'urban', and thus enumerated as urban in most reports, the proportions tend to fall well below 50 per cent, whilst in

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<sup>9</sup> The strong evidence that estimated and projected figures for urban Africa are nearly always overestimated is an important reason for excluding Angola and the DRC from contemporary analyses until they hold censuses.

<sup>10</sup> For Kenya, the 34 per cent recorded in the UN Habitat database of 2001 was way above even a possible combined core urban and 'peri-urban' figure, being higher than the share enumerated in the census eight years later! Some other data are simply wrong despite there being no definitional issues. For example, Zimbabwe's censuses showed that its urbanisation level increased by 3 per cent from 1992 to 2002, not the 8 per cent recorded by the UN.



more distant peri-urban areas the proportions are so low that their inclusion as urban would be misleading. In small towns and townships the vast majority (67 per cent) were working in agriculture (Bezzini and Lindeboom 2008). In 2002, in the coastal town of Tanga City, which at independence was Tanzania's second largest mainland urban area, the largest single employment category was made up by 'farmers', whilst agriculture, forestry and fishing together accounted for over one third of total employment (calculated from data in United Republic of Tanzania 2008).

At the opposite end of the urban scale, there are also major questions about the nature of urban economies in large cities. In a globalised world of liberalised trade, SSA *urban* productive enterprises are generally struggling to compete with other producers, often in Asia. The diktats of comparative advantage have been highly damaging for urban Africa and far more positive for urban Asia. Many African towns have suffered de-industrialisation in direct contrast to the rapid industrialisation witnessed in Asia over the past 30 years, and FDI in urban-based productive sectors generating local jobs, as opposed to services and consumption, has been limited (see; Potts 2013).<sup>11</sup> In Asia, many countries have achieved their successes through shrewd state management of mixed economies, limiting the play of market forces when this was deemed to restrict long-term economic aims. There has been forceful state intervention in sectors strategically designated to develop in the national interest, even if this meant breaking the rules of comparative advantage and liberalised trade (Chang 2007). Often, the essential conditions of competitive global production were in place before neo-liberal ideologies ruled the roost. In any case, these 'rules' are harder to break for the generally smaller, poorer and economically weak SSA countries, which, under the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s and 1990s, were thoroughly restructured (back) towards primary production outside of the cities. These countries remain to be largely in thrall to donor advice where market-based economic ideology remains dominant, despite some changes after the western financial crisis of 2008. Oil-rich nations, in particular, may have positive financial balances that lessen this influence. Chinese investments in Africa also lessen IFI dominance but do not *focus* on urban-based production and jobs that might compete with their own interests, but rather on natural resources, trade and infrastructure. Furthermore, it is much harder for poor SSA countries to play the WTO rules 'games' whereby economically powerful countries can create complex incentives for local production which do not obviously breach their 'comparative advantage' as import tariffs would (Prestowitz 2012).

Consumption in African urban areas is growing fast, however this is largely due to fast natural increase. This creates economic opportunities, certainly, but population growth, per se, is not to be confused with national structural economic change. And, on the basis of typical income levels, shifts in consumption patterns from those of the past 30 years are essentially between poor groups (Potts 2013), who tend to allow themselves the occasional new consumption of items like soft drinks, cheap toiletries, and very

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<sup>11</sup> The following section draws on the conclusions to Potts 2013.

cheap clothes, rather than higher value 'middle class' products. However, one important additional item that the urban poor in Africa are now buying, and perceive to be a necessity is a mobile phone, often recycled (like clothes) from Europe. In 2010, the McKinsey Global Institute reported on African economies in a very upbeat fashion. Yet the report's analysis of production, jobs and income-generation is essentially about natural resource-based economic opportunities outside towns and cities, despite the assertion that the economic changes discussed are not just about natural resources. Much of the analysis, apart from some references to conflicts that have come to an end, focuses on urban-based *consumption* and presumed opportunities within this area for foreign investors. There is nothing about productive investment opportunities in manufacturing industry in SSA towns or even in other types of productive enterprise that would generate large numbers of jobs for semi-skilled workers.

The contrast with the Asian experience over the past 20 years is extreme. A further brief excursion into comparative urban analysis is useful. Cambodia is a reasonable comparator for many SSA countries. In 2008 it had a population of 13.4 million and its urban system is quite comparable to that in many SSA countries. The capital, Phnom Penh, had a population of 1.2 million, whilst the next largest town had about 168,000 inhabitants. The urbanisation level is about 20 per cent. Yet in 2008 the country had 2.5 million internal economic migrants out of a total labour force of 7 million (ILO 2010) and the garment industry, which started in 1994 (Source Asean 2010) and employed 350,000 women, had increased its employment numbers by 18 per cent over the previous two years, whilst exporting products worth \$2.8 billion (ILO 2008) rising to \$3.47 billion by 2011 (ILO *et al.* 2011). In 2010, textiles, garments and shoes accounted for 95 per cent of exports, and garments for 16 per cent of the GDP (Source Asean 2010). From 1997 to 2007 the country experienced an annual average GDP growth of 9.8 per cent and about 100,000 new industrial jobs (including utilities, construction and mining) were created each year (World Bank 2009a). A final sobering statistic from Southeast Asia is that by 2008 Vietnam exported more light manufacturing products than all of sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa (World Economic Forum *et al.* 2011). Rather obviously, any comparison with China's urban economic change is even more sobering, and while it can be argued that such comparison is meaningless given that China's population exceeds that of SSA, unfortunately in a globalised world economy it is impossible to ignore the implications of 'the competition'. This is what constrains contemporary SSA urban economies and what has made urban livelihoods so vulnerable in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and has fed through into changed migration patterns.

## **6: Conclusions**

This paper has sought to demonstrate that patterns of urbanisation and rural-urban migration in SSA have changed significantly over the past 30 years. In many countries recent census evidence shows that the rate of urbanisation has slowed. Vulnerable urban livelihoods are a major reason why urban-rural migration has increased,

countering – to varying degrees – migration into towns. There is, however, significant differentiation between countries, and generalisations about SSA's urbanisation and migration have become increasingly misleading. The following nine points summarise the main elements and conclusions of the paper:

1. In the 1980s, 1990s and into the 2000s, many agency compilations (e.g. UN Habitat and World Bank) of urban data for SSA were based on poor data. This was in part due to a lack of census data. Projected data were often used and these have very often proved to be overestimates. In many cases the level of overestimation was very high. This created a 'received wisdom' about SSA urbanisation, both within the region and externally, that all SSA countries were urbanising rapidly and that the region was experiencing the world's fastest rate of urbanisation. In reality there has been increasing differentiation between countries, with many experiencing a marked reduction in urbanisation according to their most recent censuses. A smaller group of countries fits the 'received wisdom'.

2. The contribution of rural-urban migration to SSA urbanisation (in the sense of an increase in the share of national populations in urban centres) has for decades been much lower than is frequently assumed, and overall most urban population growth is fuelled by natural increase within towns and redefinition of previously rural populations as 'urban'. This has very important implications. A discourse centred on urbanisation driven by rapid in-migration from rural areas is often associated with the logical deduction that urban economies must be reasonably attractive. Alternatively, if it is recognised that urban economies are highly informalised across much of SSA and contain much poverty, the deduction is that SSA migration patterns are a theoretical puzzle. However, both these deductions fall away once it is understood that large flows of *net* in-migration are not the main drivers of population growth in most towns. It then becomes possible to (a) focus more clearly on the problems of urban poverty and (b) recognise the need to disaggregate data and to identify and analyse the towns, which really are growing exceptionally fast.

3. In some countries, small urban centres, as defined in national censuses, contribute significantly to current 'urbanisation'. Some of this is due to redefinition of settlements. This may not involve much, if any, migration. It is important to try to account for this when undertaking analyses of urbanisation *and* migration.

4. Small settlements designated as urban in some African countries may lack urban economic characteristics. In other parts of the world many would not be designated urban. This raises questions about the implications of this sort of 'urbanisation' for rigorous analysis of the structural and economic meaning of urbanisation in such countries, particularly when comparing with the experience in Asia. Data on employment and activity patterns in such settlements can help analysts to work out the extent to which this sort of 'urbanisation from below' means (or does not mean) structural transformation in national economies.

5. Designating populations as 'urban' in SSA countries purely on the basis of population density will often be misleading (cf. Kenya), for the reasons raised in point 4 above. Often these are mainly farming populations. Analyses of urbanisation and migration that do not recognise, or are unable to factor in, such designations may come to wrong conclusions.

6. In large towns and cities in SSA, formal investment in urban-based and urban-located productive enterprises at a large-scale, generating large numbers of new jobs, has been seriously constrained during the neo-liberal era of capitalism. Urban economies have informalised to such an extent that most residents derive their livelihoods from informal activities. The distribution of incomes in most large cities is desperately unequal and has become more so. Most urban people are poor and many are absolutely poor, being food insecure. One result has been significant circular migration. As a result of this, in-migration flows have been counterbalanced to a varying, but often significant, extent by out-migration. This has been reflected in overall reduced population growth in a large number of towns across SSA in recent decades. The key point for migration analysis is that mobility remains high, according to most data, and people continue to seek income opportunities, but the outcomes for national population geography have shifted in many countries, as urbanisation has slowed.

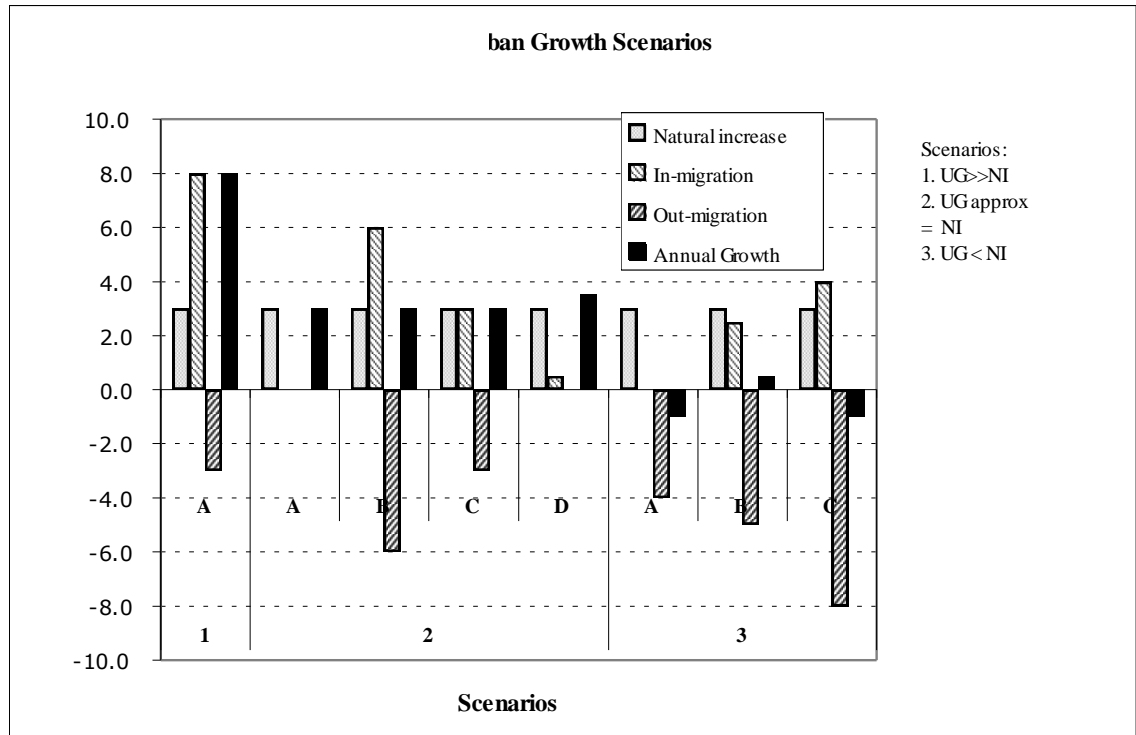
7. There is a vast range of research proving the significance of rural-urban linkages in contemporary SSA. Millions of households have livelihoods that straddle rural and urban places and income opportunities. Remittances and flows of goods and people between these households – both rural-urban and urban-rural – are crucial aspects of how SSA people 'get by'. This does not mean, however, that macro-economic and demographic assessments of migration and urbanisation in SSA which seek to compare the region's structural urban economic experiences with other parts of the world, particularly Asia, do not require appreciation of the definitional issues about settlement type and employment and activity status listed above. They do – otherwise analyses may not be comparing like with like, and conclusions cannot be rigorous. However, at the national and sub-national level, the blurring of the rural-urban divide for livelihoods is a reality and this also requires analysis and research.

8. The current era of rapid GDP growth in many SSA countries is likely to feed through into changes in migration patterns, as the geography of incomes and opportunities change in response. Evidently, cities characterised by extremely informal labour markets have often continued to experience net in-migration. As stated earlier, the analysis here should not be taken to suggest that this has ceased or reversed (except in rare circumstances) – the argument is all about scale and degree, i.e. that the numbers of net in-migrants have fallen, not that there are none. However, the creation of more formal, regularly paid jobs suitable for the employment of low- and semi-skilled workers is bound to encourage not only more in-migration but also to facilitate longer stays in towns, or permanent residence if this is desired. It will also better support informal

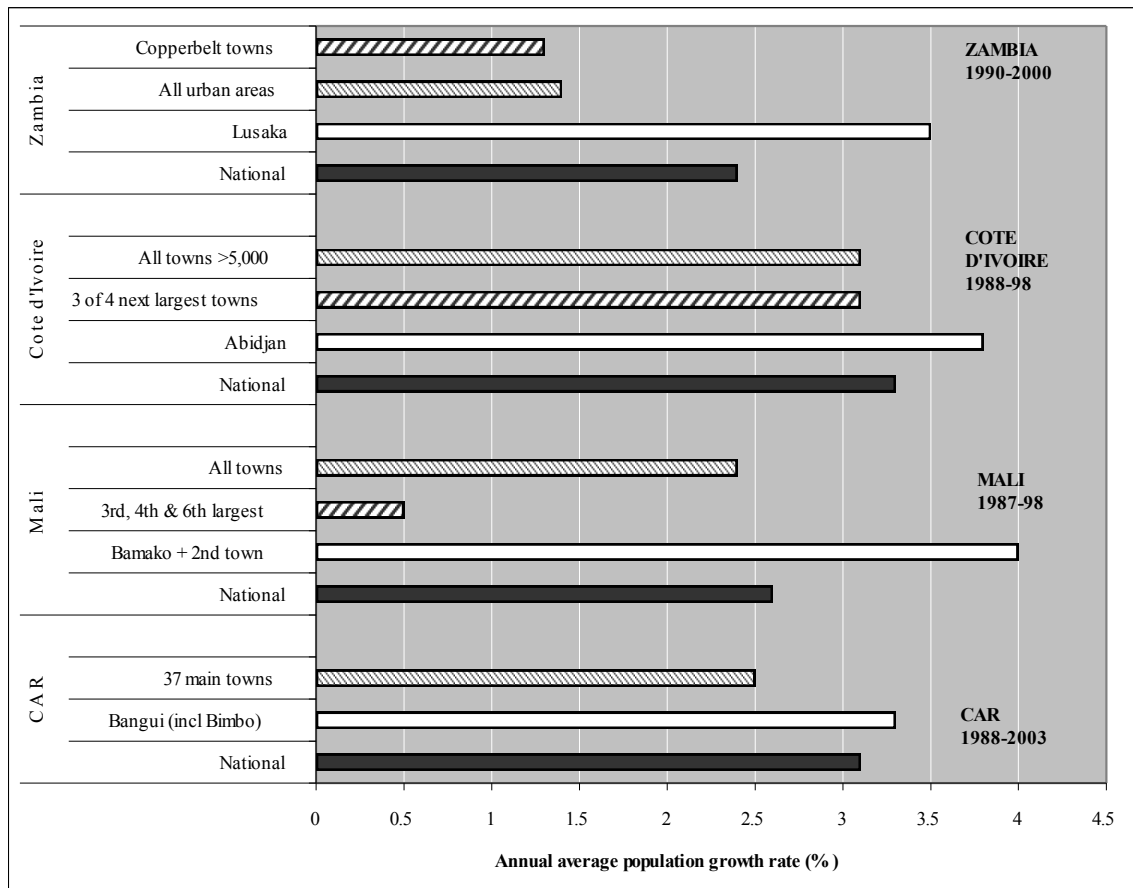
sector workers, many of whom are in services and trade, sectors for which demands will be strengthened by the increases in the number of formal workers. The beginning of re-urbanisation in Zambia, and Ghana's rapid urbanisation over the past decade are markers of this. The upsurge in mining and oil and gas production/exploration throughout SSA, in response to high levels of demand from Asian economies, is bound to have (and already is having) urbanising effects. However some mining activities have quite limited direct urbanising impacts. The future of urban economies and rural-urban and urban-rural migration trends will therefore surely depend on the extent to which SSA governments are able and willing to translate the increased income from natural resource production into diversified and specialised urban-based formal employment opportunities. The lack of comparative advantage in most of SSA, compared to Asia, in many such activities is a serious constraint, while the history of shocking inequality in incomes and in the spatial spread of the benefits of GDP generated in oil-rich countries like Angola, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, and Congo does not, unfortunately, provide a positive precedent.

9. The strong long-term growth of towns in SSA like Kumasi and Arusha, which are not capital cities, is under-researched. Their success is based largely on servicing productive hinterlands combined with having strong administrative functions. Seeking explanation in local rather than global economic spaces is unfashionable in urban studies today but, given the constraints on Africa's global *urban* economic competitiveness, research on the local underpinnings of towns that demonstrate economic vitality is nonetheless important.

**Figure 1: Urban Population Growth Scenarios**



**Figure 2: SSA countries which have experienced periods of counter-urbanisation**



**Figure 3: SSA countries which have experienced negligible urbanisation**

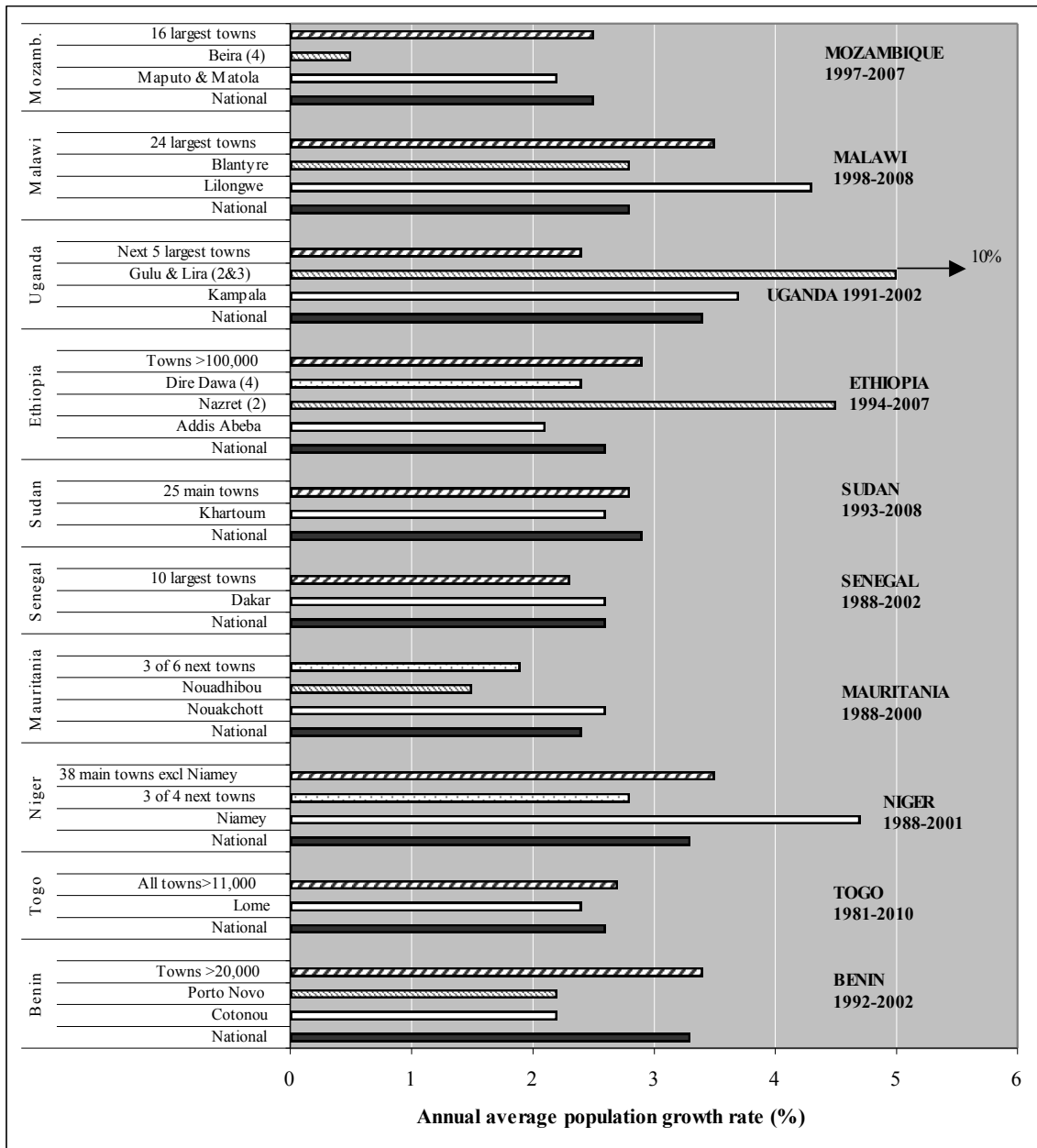
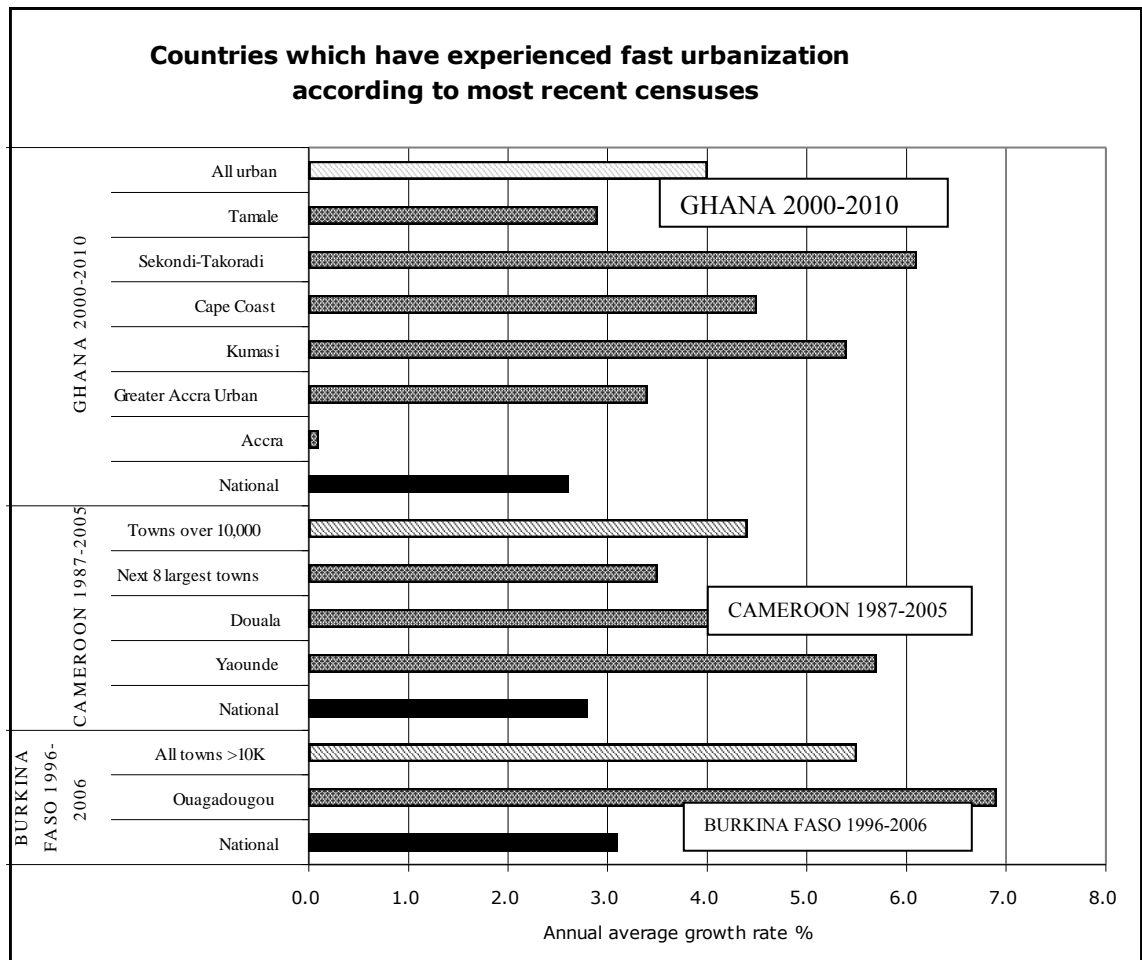
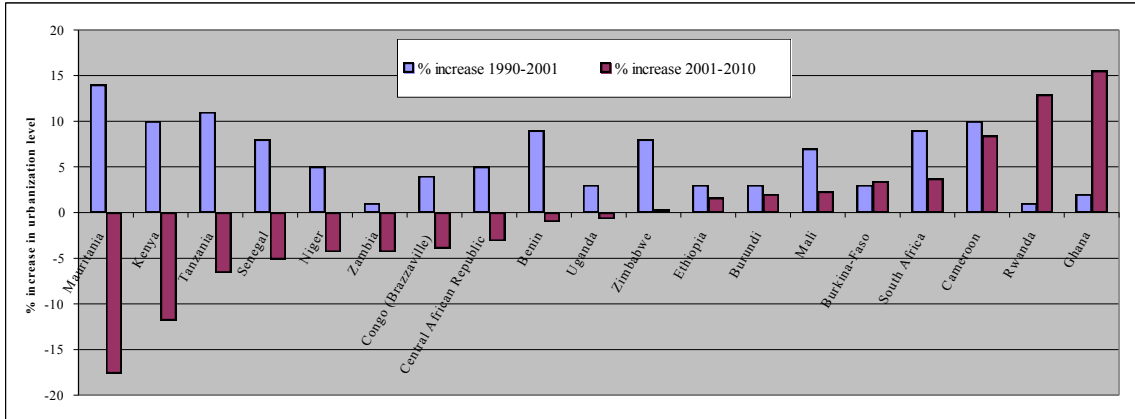




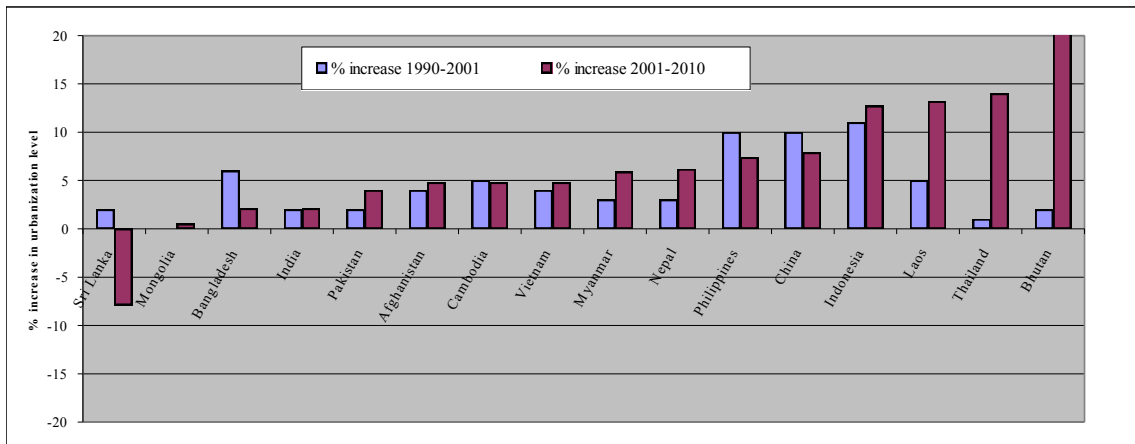
Figure 4: SSA countries which have experienced recent rapid urbanisation



**Figure 5: Comparison of changes in urbanisation levels in Asian and sub-Saharan African countries (based on UN Habitat data downloaded September 2012)**



Note: graph above depicts the percentage increase in urbanisation levels in large mainland SSA countries where there are also some census data available for cross-checking; countries such as Angola and DRC which have had no censuses for decades are excluded



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## About the Migrating out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium

***Migrating out of Poverty*** is a research programme consortium (RPC) funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It focuses on the relationship between migration and poverty – especially migration within countries and regions - and is located in five regions across Asia and Africa. The main goal of ***Migrating out of Poverty*** is to provide robust evidence on the drivers and impacts of migration in order to contribute to improving policies affecting the lives and well-being of poor migrants, their communities and countries through a programme of innovative research, capacity building and policy engagement. The RPC will also conduct analysis in order to understand the migration policy process in developing regions and will supplement the world renowned migration databases at the University of Sussex with data on internal migration.

The ***Migrating out of Poverty*** consortium is coordinated by the University of Sussex, and led by CEO Professor L. Alan Winters with Dr Priya Deshingkar as the Research Director. Core partners are: the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in Bangladesh; the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS) at the University of Ghana; the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore; the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand; and the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) in Kenya.

Migrating out of Poverty  
University of Sussex, Arts B  
Brighton BN1 9QN, United Kingdom  
Email: [migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk)  
Web: <http://migratingoutofpoverty.org>  
Twitter: @MigrationRPC  
Facebook: /migratingoutofpoverty  
Blogger: [migratingoutofpoverty.blogspot.co.uk](http://migratingoutofpoverty.blogspot.co.uk)

