

# RurbanAfrica

## African Rural-City Connections

2013

## Briefing 2

### **Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa: Patterns, Processes and Policies**



## **INTRODUCTION**

Sub-Saharan Africa is often portrayed as a mobile sub-continent. The movements of migrants, pastoralists and traders in combination with the multi-local strategies of households, challenge the general assumption that sedentary lifestyles are the normal way of living. These population movements are increasingly complex due to domestic, post-independence transformations in demography, urbanisation and policies as well as processes of economic and cultural globalisation which increasingly connects Africa to different parts of the world. This has resulted in a diversified picture in terms of mobility patterns and destinations, both at the national and international levels.

In recent years, partly due to African migration being considered a 'policy problem' by governments in the global North, there seems to be a tendency in African migration studies to focus on transnational and even transcontinental migration. With such a research bias, we easily overlook the fact that domestic migration is much more significant. Similarly, we are also likely to forget the majority of African migrants who cross international borders remain on the African continent by moving to neighbouring countries (partly due to a lack of reliable data). These omissions tend to strengthen certain popular myths regarding African migration, such as the notion Africans move *en masse* overseas. Moreover, this focus on transnational migrations tends to omit the analytical link between domestic and international population movements: migration often has a stepwise character in which domestic migration is followed by emigration. In other words, from the perspective of moving actors and households, internal and international migrations is often a continuum.

This RurbanAfrica report provides an overview of contemporary mobility in sub-Saharan Africa. It focuses mainly, but not solely, on population movements within national borders. It thereby particularly aims to identify the changing trends and patterns of mobility. The report is based on an extensive literature review and is informed by country reports from Cameroon, Ghana, Rwanda and Tanzania. It is important to note that these four case countries function as empirical illustrations as opposed to providing an exhaustive and systematic comparative overview. In the first section, the report starts with a discussion of the livelihoods approach which functions as the main analytical lens to analyze mobility processes. The second section discusses the demographic context and population trends for sub-Saharan Africa. The third section outlines relevant policies that have affected mobility patterns throughout the years, while section four offers an in-depth discussion of African mobility patterns and their transformations.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Historically, the processes of state formation and the uneven and incomplete introduction of the capitalist mode of production in sub-Saharan Africa have laid the foundation for contemporary spatial distributions of people and their mobility within and across nations in the continent. This has led to distinct forms of path dependence in postcolonial mobility patterns. In recent times, the absolute number of people on the move has escalated and mobility now involves increasingly connected spaces and places. Trajectories tend to show highly varied patterns in terms of origin, destination and temporality. Another trend in current mobility is a reduced selectivity in terms of gender and generation. Among the variety of processes that have a bearing on current human mobility in sub-Saharan Africa, three key drivers are identified: urbanisation, agricultural transformation and globalisation. In addition, specific national-level policies – often triggered by internationally driven regulations, requirements and guidelines – are of vital influence for domestic spatial and temporal patterns.

Overall, sub-Saharan Africa is home to rural societies with predominantly rural-based livelihoods. An estimated 67 per cent of the population lives in rural areas. According to the latest national

census data, estimated urbanisation levels of sub-Saharan African countries show extreme disparities. While Rwanda (19 per cent) and Tanzania (27 per cent) are among the least urbanised countries, Cameroon (53 per cent) and Ghana (53 per cent) belong to the category with highest urbanisation levels. At the same time, the countries with the lowest levels of urbanisation show the highest average annual urbanisation rates (Tanzania 4.8, Rwanda 4.6, Ghana 3.6, and Cameroon 3.3 per cent respectively).

With an estimated average urbanisation rate of 3.6 per cent per year, sub-Saharan Africa is the world's most rapidly urbanising region. Migration from rural to urban areas obviously contributes to this process. Other factors include high natural population growth in cities and the administrative reclassification of areas from rural to urban spaces. Migrants who settle in urban areas are generally motivated by the better employment opportunities and services they expect to access. People also move for family-related reasons. However, it is a common misunderstanding that all domestic mobility is a unidirectional movement from rural areas to cities. Nor can such migrants always be characterised as permanent. On the contrary, many people move temporarily, whether on a daily, weekly or seasonal basis. Mobility also occurs between rural areas, between cities, and from urban to rural areas.

Recent transformation processes in agriculture and land distribution have greatly contributed to changes in the livelihoods and mobility of rural households. Multiple factors compel rural households to diversify – increasing scarcity of productive land for agriculture, as well as land fragmentation, land concentration, large-scale agricultural investments and new forms of agricultural production are just a few. National-level policies also contribute to agricultural transformation, for example by prioritising agricultural productivity and the production of export crops, through land tenure reforms, land-use regulations, or through agricultural colonisation schemes. Resettlement and other spatial planning policies for rural development also immediately affect population distribution. As such, agricultural transformation and related policies have mixed effects on the mobility strategies of rural households. The commoditisation of agriculture may lead to periods of increased labour demand, whereas both the fragmentation and concentration of land will give rise to outmigration. As a consequence, the resulting patterns and processes of mobility are highly complex and multifaceted.

The process of globalisation is a third important driver of mobility in sub-Saharan Africa. On the one hand, economic globalisation represents the deepening and broadening of capitalism in all sectors – agriculture, mining, manufacturing, as well as within commerce and other service activities – with the intention of generating an aggregate improvement in utility through the efficiency and rigours of the market. On the other hand, the consequences of these processes are highly unequal across territories and social groups with major impacts on the livelihoods of rural and urban households alike.

Thus, mobility patterns in sub-Saharan African countries demonstrate a wide variety in both spatiality and temporality. This report presents a typology of internal migration that includes both dimensions. For the time dimension, the typology distinguishes between daily, short-term (periodic), medium-term (seasonal) and long-term mobility. As for the spatial dimension, the scheme differentiates between rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-rural and urban-urban mobility. This typology can serve as a powerful analytical framework for empirical studies on domestic mobility. Most likely, each of the resulting 16 types of mobility will be present in the four RurbanAfrica case study countries. The framework can be further refined by attaching more importance to variations that occur along the rural-urban continuum, while also including aspects of functional

differentiation (e.g., by explicitly distinguishing between rural service centres, small towns, intermediate cities, peri-urban areas, and primate cities).

Another trend in current mobility is the reduced selectivity in terms of gender and generation. While traditional migration regimes in sub-Saharan Africa used to be male dominated, contemporary mobility patterns are becoming increasingly feminised, resulting in ever greater shares of women, particularly younger women, migrating independently in search of employment. Conventional gender roles may gradually change as a result of the increasing autonomy of women who break out of their traditional gender straitjackets.

Finally, the report exposes a further bias in the current mobility literature on sub-Saharan Africa (in addition to the narrow focus of transnational migration discussed above). The majority of research on domestic mobility turns a blind eye to other types of mobility currently occurring outside of rural-urban contexts. This research bias easily leads to a stereotyping of mobility that often suggests a universal rural exodus: a generalised unidirectional movement from rural areas to cities. Recognising the huge variation that occurs within spatiality and temporality of sub-Saharan Africa mobility processes, the RurbanAfrica project aims to avoid such myopia.

#### **SOURCE**

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## RurbanAfrica - African Rural-City Connections

The African Rural-City Connections (RurbanAfrica) project explores the connections between rural transformations, mobility, and urbanization processes and analyzes how these contribute to an understanding of the scale, nature and location of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. The RurbanAfrica project is advancing the research agenda on rural-city connections in sub-Saharan Africa by addressing a range of crucial components: agricultural transformations, rural livelihoods, city dynamics, and access to services in cities. Our aim is to generate new insights into the relationship between rural-city connections and poverty dynamics.

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