

The political economy of slums in Africa

In a recently published working paper, LSE's Sean Fox examines the wide variation in slum incidence across several countries in Africa.

Popular accounts of life in African cities typically portray a kind of Dickensian squalor in the tropics: unkempt masses struggling with poverty, disease and violence. While such accounts tend to overlook the dynamic nature of African cities and the resilience of their residents, they nonetheless reflect an important truth. According to UN-Habitat, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of “slum incidence” of any major world region, with over 60% of the region’s urban population—roughly 200 million people—living in settlements characterised by some combination of overcrowding, tenuous dwelling structures, and deficient access to adequate water and sanitation facilities. However, there is wide variation in slum incidence across countries within the region (see Table 1). Why do so many Africans live in slums, and what accounts for the wide variation in slum incidence across countries in the region? I address these questions in a [recently published working paper](#).

Table 1 – Slum incidence by region and for selected African countries

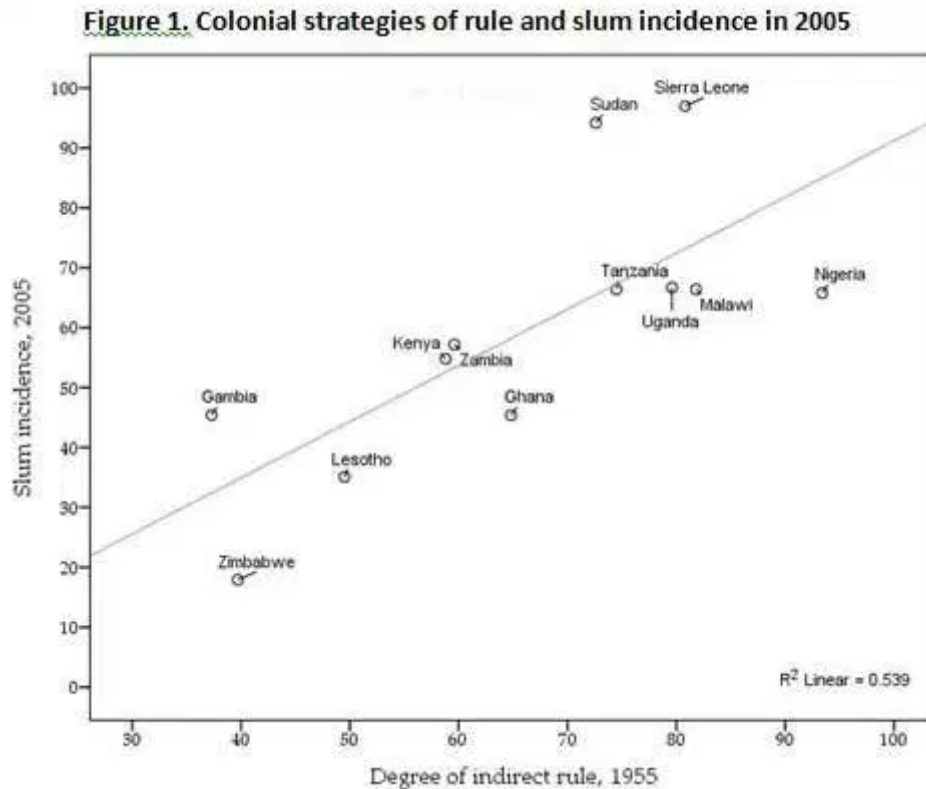
	Slum population as % of urban population		
	2000	2005	2010
<i>Region</i>			
Developing Regions	39.3	35.7	32.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	65.0	63.0	61.7
Southern Asia	45.8	40.0	35.0
South-eastern Asia	39.6	34.2	31.0
Eastern Asia	37.4	33.0	28.2
Western Asia	20.6	25.8	24.6
Latin America & the Caribbean	29.2	25.5	23.5
Northern Africa	20.3	13.4	13.3
<i>Selected African countries</i>			
Ethiopia	88.6	81.8	
Tanzania	70.1	66.4	
Nigeria	69.6	65.8	
Ghana	52.1	45.4	
South Africa	33.2	28.7	
Zimbabwe	3.3	17.9	

Source: UN-Habitat (2008)

Social scientists have traditionally portrayed slums as a natural and temporary by-product of economic modernisation. But the scale and persistence of slum settlements in developing regions in recent decades presents a serious challenge to this notion. A variety of theories has been advanced to account for this apparent deviation from the assumed path of modernisation. Put together it tells a fairly simple story: urban population growth in developing regions has outpaced economic and institutional modernisation. I refer to this as the “disjointed modernisation” theory of slums and test it empirically using regression analysis. In support of this theory, I find that nearly 70% of cross-country variation in slum incidence can be accounted for by variation in urban population growth rates, measures of income and economic diversification and a measure of institutional quality.

However, identifying the contemporary correlates of slum incidence does not amount to a convincing causal explanation for the scale and diversity of the phenomenon. Why did the process of modernisation become more disjointed in some countries than others? To answer this question I trace the origins of divergence in urban development trajectories back to the colonial era.

Generally speaking, colonisers stimulated urban population growth but laid a poor foundation for urban economic development and effective urban governance. But colonial experiences varied widely across countries in Africa. Where economic and political interests were strong, towns and cities received significant investment and institutional development; where economic and political interests were relatively marginal, towns and cities received minimal investment and were left with ad-hoc governance structures. I demonstrate that this variation is correlated with contemporary slum incidence. For example, Figure 1 below plots slum incidence against a measure of “British indirect rule”—i.e. the number of court cases adjudicated by indigenous as opposed to colonial authorities. The figure shows that slum incidence in 2005 is closely correlated with the measure of British indirect rule (a proxy for institutional investment) in 1955, supporting the hypothesis that the colonial era represents a “critical juncture” in the history of urban development in sub-Saharan Africa.



Having identified the colonial origins of “disjointed” modernisation, I turn my attention to the mechanisms of path dependency that have served to perpetuate colonial patterns of urban investment and institutional development. Post-colonial African governments have had anywhere between 25 and 50 years to redress the failures of their colonial forebears. Why have they not done so? I offer two complementary explanations.

First, urban underdevelopment offers myriad opportunities for political and economic entrepreneurs. For example, politicians and bureaucrats often use the absence of formal property rights in urban areas to engage in “land racketeering”—i.e. offering squatters on “public” land protection from eviction in return for political support or economic rents. Similarly, the absence of water infrastructure yields very lucrative opportunities for the private vendors who inevitably step in to fill the void. In other words, urban underdevelopment has proven very profitable for a range of actors in African cities, resulting in the emergence of a broad constellation of status quo interests opposed to investment and institutional reform.

Second, an anti-urbanisation bias emerged in development discourse and practice in the late 1970s. Up to that point, towns and cities were seen as engines of prosperity and progressive social and political spaces. But a series of influential publications in the 1970s and 1980s portrayed urbanites as economic parasites feeding off the surplus produced by peasants in the countryside and exerting an undue influence in public affairs. Investing in urban development came to be seen as *anti*-developmental. As a result, governments across Africa implemented

policies to restrict or discourage rural-urban migration and promote rural development. By 2007, 78% of African countries had policies in place to restrict migration; up from 49% in 1976. There was also a significant contraction in international development assistance for urban development projects. As Table 2 demonstrates, World Bank shelter lending in the region, which began in 1972, shrivelled to insignificance by 2005.

Table 2. Trends in World Bank shelter lending in sub-Saharan Africa, 1971-2005

	1972-1981	1982-1991	1992-2005
Total shelter lending	\$498 million	\$409 million	\$81 million
Equivalent per capita	\$5.20	\$2.74	\$0.32

Notes: Shelter lending data from Buckley and Kalarickal (2006); per capita estimates based on total urban population in sub-Saharan Africa at the end of each period (i.e. 1981, 1991 and 2005) drawn from World Bank, World Development Indicators online database, accessed September 2012.

The proliferation of slums in sub-Saharan Africa in recent decades is de facto evidence of government failure to invest in urban development. But history is not destiny. As Africa's urban population continues to grow, politicians are increasingly likely to find it in their interest to address the basic needs of urban residents. And if they are committed to stimulating economic growth and diversification they will need to do so. Cities can serve as engines of economic development, but only if they have adequate infrastructure and their residents have safe, healthy and secure places to live. The international community could help facilitate this transformation by recognising the urban potential and supporting (as opposed to discouraging) efforts to invest in urban development in the region.

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<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/pdf/WP/WP146.pdf>

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