The Urbanization Dilemma: How rapid population expansion could clog up Zambia’s main cities

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Zambia’s urban population is growing dramatically, driven by perceptions of better economic opportunities, infrastructure and services in urban areas. Areas like Lusaka, Kitwe and so on are getting overwhelmed and growth gauging from poorly planned residential settlements, tariff jams, etc. are failing to cope with the population. However, national planning authorities and the private sector have not responded appropriately to the surge in the urban population and without urgent action, the sustainability of Zambian cities is in serious jeopardy.
The Urbanization Dilemma: How rapid population expansion could clog up Zambia’s main cities

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Zambia is becoming increasingly more urban by the decade; at current population growth rates, by 2030 about one quarter (24%) of Zambians will live in Lusaka province alone compared to one-sixth (17%) of the population currently. One therefore tends to wonder about the country’s ability to cope with these increasing levels of urbanization. Serious questions arise about the preparedness of the country’s cities to sustain this rapid population expansion. It is likely that their sustainability is in serious jeopardy.

Rapid Urbanization, a Real Problem for Zambia

Todaro and Smith (2003) describe this phenomenon of massive movements of people from rural areas to burgeoning cities as “one of the most complex and nuanced dilemmas of the development process” [p.308]. The authors report that by the early 1990s, approximately half the governments of the world, mostly those of developing countries, considered the patterns of population distribution to be unsatisfactory. A key issue was the rapid growth of urban areas, with the threat of poverty becoming increasingly urbanized. But is Zambia one of the countries that have firmly recognized the importance of planning for sustainable cities? Has the country truly recognized the urbanization dilemma and sought ways for addressing it towards safeguarding sustainable urban development? The insights below suggest that it is highly unlikely that this is happening.

Zambia’s urbanization dilemma is very real. Figure 1 below compares Zambia’s urban population proportion with 12 other sub-Saharan African countries, including all eight of its neighbors. Unquestionably, then, Zambia is among those countries that Todaro and Smith argue should be paying attention to its urbanization patterns. Even today, one in every three Zambians lives in an urban area.

Figure 1: Share of urban population in total population

Source: constructed from PRB (2010) data
The increasing nature of the urbanization dilemma is also very real. Figure 2 below shows Zambia’s population density trends by province between 1980 and 2010. It can be clearly seen that the number of persons per km$^2$ inhabiting inhabited by more than 100 persons per km$^2$ compared to 63 person per km$^2$ in the Copperbelt (another highly urbanized, predominantly copper mining province), 25 person per km$^2$ in Eastern province (a fairly rural province), and 6 persons per km$^2$ in Western province (a very rural province). In fact, the population density for Lusaka district within the province was a staggering 4,842 person per km$^2$ in 2010. The surge in Lusaka’s population has been largely driven by rural-urban migrations of people, particularly the youth, who move to the cities in search of economic opportunities denied to them in the countryside.

Figure 2: Trends in Zambia’s population densities, by province

![Trends in Zambia’s population densities, by province](source: constructed from CSO (census) data)

A similar story is seen in the Copperbelt, though to a less dramatic extent compared to Lusaka. The Copperbelt had historically been the economic hub of the country because of the copper mining industry situated in the province. But with a fall in mining fortunes (including outputs, incomes and employment) since the mid-1970s, the Copperbelt readily lost ground to Lusaka. However, the rebound in the population density trend is also observed for the Copperbelt in the latter period (2010), mainly on account of the high densities in the Kitwe district (672 persons per km$^2$) and Ndola district (413 persons per km$^2$). This is most likely underpinned by the marked rebound of the Zambian copper industry in the province since about 2001.

**Rural Poverty and Urban Woes**

The Living Conditions and Monitoring Surveys (LCMSs) estimated rural poverty levels to be at about 80% of the rural population in 2006, up from 78% in 2004. In the same period (2004-2006) urban poverty was estimated to have dramatically declined from 53% to 34%. From the ensuing migratory patterns between 2000 and 2010, the estimates of the LCMSs are quite consistent with the common perceptions of ordinary people in rural areas; rural populations have been moving to urban localities where they perceive higher economic opportunities and lower poverty levels.

The unsettling thing about the surges in urban populations is that urban development policies and urban planning arrangements in Zambia appear to be quite weak and are possibly lagging far behind the population explosions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the population growth in the urban areas is rapidly overtaking and overwhelming the cities’ infrastructure and social services. A few examples easily illustrate this point.

The Government has been relinquishing to the private sector a large part of its traditional role of providing housing through the Ministry of Local Government and Housing (MLGH), National Housing Authority (NHA) and other public sector organisations. Thus, the private sector’s role in property development has been increased in tandem with the Government’s scale-down. Construction, particularly urban real estate development is now largely driven by the private sector. During this shift, it appears that regulation of the private sector has been very limited. For example, Chalala, one of the fastest growing residential areas in Lusaka, covering an
area of almost 350 hectares and situated only 9 km from the city centre, is apparently located on one of the city’s main groundwater aquifers. The new settlement is not serviced with water and sanitation services from the Lusaka City Council main systems, meaning that property owners and developers have had to build stand-alone boreholes and soak-aways (sewer systems) above the aquifer. It is highly likely that over the years the aquifer will become increasingly exposed to fecal contamination from the soak-aways and with these being constructed at shallower levels than the boreholes, serious health problems from water-borne illnesses are likely ensue among Chalala residents.

This lack of planned services, particularly proper roads, and water and sewerage services is not unique to Chalala. A quick spot-check of many formal settlement development projects such as the Meanwood initiatives confirms that new property owners in the estate development projects dotted around the city start and even finish their building projects without getting adequate access to some of the key social services like sewerage. Moreover, they confirm that they are unaware of any public arrangements for supporting the development of social services in their areas. Worse still, by 2002, about 70% of Lusaka’s population lived in poor, unplanned settlements comprising 20% of the city’s residential land. The city essentially failed to cater to everyone’s expectations, relegating the poor to informal settlement areas where housing is more affordable. Reinforced by the lack of a sustainable housing policy, urban growth has simply been absorbed into informal settlements. The housing, health, and environmental conditions in the growing informal settlements of Zambia’s cities consequently are extremely poor.

Meanwhile the Zambia Revenue Authority (ZRA) estimates that about 300 cars are imported into Zambia every day. Over a three-year period is implies an expansion in the number of motor vehicles of 540,000, an additional fleet that, if lined up bumper to bumper, would cover a distance of over 540km extending from Chongwe (to the east of Lusaka) through Lusaka and all the way through Livingstone to somewhere beyond Victoria Falls Town in neighbouring Zimbabwe. Most of these cars are bound for Zambia’s urban areas in Lusaka and the Copperbelt. The peak-hour traffic jams that all Lusaka residents experience are clear anecdotal evidence of the emerging congestion problem associated with high levels of vehicle importation, depicting yet another urbanisation challenge.

Amidst all these challenges, city planning is hampered by systemic weaknesses and allegations of corruption. The Lusaka City Council – under the Ministry of Local Government and Housing (MLGH) for instance has a City Planning Department, whose visibility even on the City Council’s own website (www.lcc.gov.zm) is marginal. Its services appear to be poorly appreciated in practice. And with alleged corruption in the allocation of Lusaka city land by the Council, the Council’s agency was revoked in 2006 leaving it with no legal right to semi-autonomously allocate State land (www.ministryoflands.gov.zm).

Thus, even where seemingly reliable plans were made, systemic inertias combined with the alleged corruption worked to derail progress. A good example is that the Lusaka City Council formulated a Structure Plan in 2000 based on 2000 census demographic and other factors, but for over 10 years, this plan awaited the determination of MLGH, which never took place; the plan is now more or less stale.
**The Way Forward**

While problems have been emerging, the visibility and efforts of the urban and regional planning institutions in the public and private sectors has remained obscure at best. There are obvious gaps in public policy and planning for urban areas, which impinge sustainable urbanization and city development. An important first step towards covering the gaps and improving the level of planned urban development may be to push key public, private and civil society stakeholders to start talking about the urbanization dilemma. This is likely to put the responsible organizations in the spotlight, pushing them to become more responsive and accountable in fulfilling their urban planning and regulation responsibilities. It is hoped that this opinion paper provides the right provocation and quick evidence to spur debate on the urbanization dilemma in Zambia.

With all that has been said in this paper, the specific actions that various stakeholders could take up as recommendations include the following:

- Give a facelift to the Lusaka City Council and other city and municipal councils, towards changing public opinions that the Council is clouded in corruption and has limited relevance in urban planning.
- Promote public awareness campaigns to sensitize the general public about Zambia’s land use policy, using clear and simple explanations about the divisions of land-related roles and responsibilities between the Ministry of Land, the Ministry of Local Government and the city and municipal councils.
- Improve resource levels to appropriate local authorities, towards improving the enforcement of land use laws and regulations.
- Generate empirical evidence about the drivers and consequences of urbanization, identifying from among the drivers and consequences which ones can be significantly influenced by policy and connecting those to the right policy makers and other key stakeholders.

Notes:

3. Of course the likelihood is high that the larger populations in urban areas were also driven by higher birth rates and lower mortality rates since the urban areas are serviced with relatively better social services (healthcare, housing, roads, education, water and sanitation infrastructure, etc).